

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE UNDERWORLD MANSION





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
UNDERWORLD MANSION**

Bob accepts a simple task of feeding cats and finds himself in a strange and creepy mansion in the canyon. Then something goes wrong and he does not come back. Immediately Jupiter and Pete proceed to look for their friend. In the process, they stumble onto several seemingly isolated clues that are difficult to piece together. Is the owner of the mansion behind all this? Somehow The Three Investigators need to regroup to solve this mystery together.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Underworld Mansion

*Original German text by
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Der dunkle Wächter

(The Three ???: The Dark Sentinel)

by

Ben Nevis

(2019)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2022-04-23)

Contents

- 1. Feeding Cats**
- 2. The Three-Headed Dog**
- 3. Hades and Kore**
- 4. Surprise Guest**
- 5. Demons**
- 6. Monster Claws**
- 7. Serious Deductions**
- 8. A Message from Bob**
- 9. The Stolen Car**
- 10. Mary Helps Out**
- 11. Trouble with the Police**
- 12. A Surprising Message**
- 13. Back to the Demon's Lair**
- 14. In Search of Clues**
- 15. The Intruder**
- 16. The Noose Tightens**
- 17. The Underworld**
- 18. Release from the Underworld**

1. Feeding Cats

“She had blonde hair,” Pete said, “for sure!”

“Black!” asserted Jupiter.

“Dark blonde at the most. You didn’t even see her properly!”

“Are you saying that...” Jupiter took a breath and searched for words, but Bob intervened.

The Three Investigators were sitting in their headquarters and actually wanted to discuss quite different things than Jupiter and Pete’s visit to Outdoor World—a store that sold equipment for outdoor activities like diving, camping and mountain climbing.

“Does it matter what the sales assistant at Outdoor World looked like?” asked Bob. “And besides—”

“Yes, it does!” said Pete. “And I’ll tell you why—Jupe is always bragging about his super memory but this time, he’s off the mark.”

“Give it up, Pete,” Jupe said. “You’re wrong.”

“No, I’m not!” Pete burst out. “You know what? You don’t have an eye for girls! All the time you were only interested in the technology of the diving watch and not in the woman who explained it all to us.”

“—Which, after all, is what matters if you want to survive underwater,” Jupe said calmly.

“Interesting life also exists on land!” Pete continued.

“Stop it now!” Bob shouted. “I tell you what—I’ll call the shop and ask.”

That caused a brief moment of silence. Bob grinned. He read on the faces of Jupiter and Pete that perhaps they didn’t really want to know after all.

“Call? You can’t ask that on the phone,” Jupiter finally said.

“I don’t know either,” Pete murmured. “It might be better that we go there and check it out... some other time.”

“Then it might be too late,” Bob said. “Hair colour can be changed quickly!” He grabbed the phone.

Pete rolled his eyes. “Bob, please,” he said, “if you tell them we’re arguing about a sales assistant’s hair colour, I can never show my face there again.”

But Bob ignored the objection and proceeded to dial the number. After the fifth ring, someone answered.

“Hello Outdoor World?” said Bob. “Yes, my name is Bob Andrews. May I speak to the boss, Mr Stapleton, please? ... Thank you... Hello, Mr Stapleton! I’m Bob Andrews... Yes, two friends of mine came to your shop earlier today and asked one of your sales assistants for advice about a diving watch. I have a question for her... I’m sorry, I don’t know her name... Is that the blonde or the black-haired woman? ... Oh, I see... No, you don’t need to. I’ll come by again... Yes, I guess it’s better to ask in person. Thank you very much.” Bob hung up and turned around. “All right,” he said and grinned again.

“Well?” asked Jupiter, visibly glad that Bob had used an excuse to get the information.

But Bob’s face gave nothing away. “I’ll tell you in a minute. First you have to listen to me. I’ve wanted to tell you all along that I can’t go this weekend, but I couldn’t get a word in with all your bickering.”

“You mean you can’t come with us to the coast to surf?” said Pete disappointedly. “You better have a good reason!”

“My cousin from Seattle.”

“The one who always talks non-stop?” Jupiter made a snapping motion with his hand.

“Yes, Mary. I have to be with her. It was all a bit spontaneous. After all, my parents are in Canada and...” Bob looked at Jupiter from the side. “Or maybe we should take Mary with us on our trip?”

“Out of the question,” Jupiter said firmly. “She... she’s mainly interested in party life... and besides, we have no more room in the camper van. If it’s absolutely not possible with you, then Pete and I have no choice but to go without you.”

“Hmm...” Bob said disappointedly. As he knew from the past, his cousin Mary and Jupiter simply couldn’t get along. After five seconds at the latest, they would be at loggerheads, so he would have to bite the bullet and spend the weekend with her in Rocky Beach.

“It’s always the most fun in threes!” said Pete. “—But I don’t want to miss out on this trip. Perhaps we’ll meet other people there and—” Disappointed, he banged his fist on the back of the chair.

“I know,” Bob muttered, “it’s stupid.”

Pete took a breath. “Anyway, back to the most important issue now, Bob, the hair colour! Who’s right? Juve or me?”

Bob was about to reply when Aunt Mathilda’s voice came in from outside.

Jupiter had lived with Mathilda Jones and her husband Titus since his parents died many years ago. They ran a salvage yard in Rocky Beach. On the premises, buried under all kinds of junk and scrap metal, was an old mobile home trailer where The Three Investigators had set up an office for their investigation agency. This was where they were currently at.

However, they now had to leave their favourite hideout. Aunt Mathilda’s message was clear: “A visitor for you! Where are you? Come out at once!”

The boys went out the trailer door and crept through a short tunnel of corrugated sheet metal until they reached the back of a disused refrigerator. They called this the Cold Gate, and it was one of the secret passageways to their hideout. They had modified the back wall of the fridge so that it could be pushed to the side. Bob did just that and then reached in to open the front door a gap. He peeked out to check that there was nobody looking, before he got out from the fridge, followed by Pete and Juve.

“Lesley!” Bob exclaimed when he spotted the young bookseller out at the yard.

Lesley Dimple worked at Booksmith, a small shop in Rocky Beach that sold new and antiquarian books—books that are rare and hardly available anymore.

The sky had closed in, and as a light drizzle began, Juve and Pete also joined them.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you much,” Lesley said.

Aunt Mathilda was moving a rack of uniforms under a protective canopy. It was clear to The Three Investigators that she was pricking up her ears in curiosity.

Lesley looked round. “I just have one question—a small request to be precise.”

Bob nodded. “What is it about?”

“It’s about cats... two, to be precise.”

Jupiter’s features contorted. Only cats? When visitors came unexpectedly, he always hoped for a new case. He would even have skipped the trip to the sea for that, but this time it didn’t sound so exciting.

“They need to be fed,” Lesley said. “Mr Pinches, a good client of ours, called me this morning. He had to go to San Francisco unexpectedly and couldn’t get hold of the person

who usually does the job.”

“And you don’t have time for the cats?” asked Jupiter. “Then why did you accept the request?”

“A while ago, I got an invitation to go to Catalina Island for the weekend, and I would love to accept it.”

“How long will he be gone?” asked Bob.

“Mr Pinches? He should be back by Tuesday,” Lesley said. “I need your help till Sunday because I can take back the task on Monday morning.”

“All right,” said Bob. “Jupe and Pete will not be around, but I can do it. The cats have to be able to put up with my yapping cousin though!” He smiled and glanced up at the dark sky. “Shouldn’t we go in before the rain comes?” The others nodded and the group retreated to the verandah of the yard office.

Aunt Mathilda had meanwhile disappeared into the office, reassured. Feeding cats sounded harmless for the boys to help. On the other hand, she was very suspicious of investigation assignments which, in her opinion, usually put The Three Investigators in far too much danger.

“Oh yes, would you like a drink?” Bob asked.

“No thanks.” She smiled at Bob. “I’m usually very happy to, you know, but I have to go in a minute.”

“Okay, so where does this Mr Pinches live?” Bob wanted to know.

“His house is in the canyon near here. Here’s his address and a sketch of the map...” She handed Bob a piece of paper. “I used to deliver books there,” she continued. “It’s a secluded property a bit past a bend with a huge boulder, as you can see on the sketch. You have to be careful not to miss the driveway. His house looks more like a Gothic mansion. Anyway, just to prepare you, I find it a little... uh... creepy.”

Bob saw Jupiter grinning. He knew exactly what the First Investigator was thinking. Things may be ‘creepy’ for most people, but not for Jupiter Jones. He was made of different stuff!

Wind came up and pushed the heavier rain far under the verandah roof. To avoid getting wet, Lesley took a few steps towards the office door. “The key to the house is just outside the verandah hidden in a kind of plastic skull with crossbones. The food is in the kitchen. There’s also a note on the proportion of the food for the cats.”

“I can do it,” said Bob.

“Can you start this evening?” Lesley asked. “Then I can pack up and go for my trip straight away.”

Bob nodded.

“Thanks, Bob,” Lesley said. “I owe you one! Gotta go now!” Then she ran through the rain and out the main gate.

“You could have lent her an umbrella,” Pete said.

Bob blushed. “If it keeps raining like this, you won’t have much fun surfing!” He quickly changed the subject and rubbed his arms, freezing.

Pete looked up at the sky. “This will be over in an hour. Tomorrow the sun will shine again!”

“But first we’ll go inside,” Jupiter decided, “and then Bob can finally confirm for us that my powers of observation are, of course, the best!”

They went inside the yard office. Aunt Mathilda had made tea. The Three Investigators sat down at the table and helped themselves.

“Okay, Bob... let’s get back to the most important issue of the day,” Jupiter said. “What is the colour of the hair?”

“So...” Bob began and slowly took a sip from his cup.

“Don’t make it so exciting!” the First Investigator urged. By now he was very sure of himself. Actually, he was never wrong.

Pete, on the other hand, shrugged his shoulders. For whatever reason, Jupiter regularly hit the mark. Pete’s imagination had probably played a trick on him. Probably the images of the sales assistant and another person had overlapped in his brain. The first excuses ran through Pete’s head.

Now Bob put on a facial expression like a quiz master on a million-dollar game show. He looked mischievously at his friends.

“Believe it or not...” he said slowly, taking another sip of tea and then another. “Outdoor World... does not have a sales assistant with black hair! None at all—at least at the moment! Anyway, congratulations, Pete. You are the winner of the day! The sales assistant’s hair is dark blonde!”

Jupiter choked on the tea and spluttered it over half the table.

2. The Three-Headed Dog

They almost missed the entrance. As Lesley had drawn in the sketch, the gate was quite hidden, a few metres off the road and half hidden behind bushes.

“Stop,” shouted Bob, “it must be here!”

Uncle Titus looked in the rear-view mirror and braked sharply. “Are you sure you’ll have no problem getting back to Rocky Beach later?”

“That’s no more than a twenty-minute walk,” Bob said. “If you’re driving back from your shopping trip in the mountains and I’m still walking around here—”

“—Then I’ll pick you up,” Titus Jones said and laughed, “but only if you can still fit in the pick-up then. After all, I should have lots of stuff from the estate of an antique collector to haul back.”

“Anyway, we’ll see then!” Bob got out. “Thanks for the lift!”

“Not an issue.” Jupiter’s uncle nodded to Bob and drove off.

Bob’s car, an old Beetle, was at home and his bicycle still at the salvage yard. When he had wanted to cycle here, he had noticed that it had a flat tyre. It had been a lucky circumstance that Uncle Titus was about to drive into the canyon and could give Bob a lift. At least Bob had saved himself walking all the way up here.

Bob let a white Toyota pass and crossed the road. A crumbling paved path led towards the gate, on whose right boundary stone a grimacing figure made of stone was enthroned. Approaching, Bob saw that it was a dog with three heads and a snake’s tail. Below it was a letterbox mounted with a small sign whose weathered letters could be made out as ‘A. Pinches’.

The gate was only ajar and Bob slipped through. He wanted to feed the cats as quickly as possible so he could get home in time for a shower, change—and then pick up Mary from the airport and plunge into the Rocky Beach city centre with her in the evening. That was the plan—and then he would have to content with her non-stop chatting for ninety percent of the time. Even then, for Bob’s ten percent, he would have to work on what to say.

Behind the gate, the driveway led between trees. Their roots had pushed long ridges into the paved surface. Puddles of water bore witness to the rain that had fallen heavily but briefly over the coast. It was a strange atmosphere—no longer day and not yet night. The sun had disappeared behind the mountains, but water was still steaming up from the warm path.

Bob stopped and sucked in the wonderful air. It was a pity that Jupiter and Pete were not there as they had wanted to gather all the stuff for their trip and therefore showed little interest in watching him feed cats.

Bob walked on, came around a bend and suddenly the view opened up. Beyond a wide forecourt lay Mr Pinches’s mansion. It was bigger than Bob had imagined... and darker. He could well understand now that Lesley found it creepy, especially because of all the strange statues lined by the walls, similar to the three-headed dog that had greeted him at the gate. They reminded Bob of stone statues with creepy appearances that protected the medieval cathedrals in Europe from other evil spirits.

The monsters stood out darkly against the pink evening sky. Bob concentrated and discovered more and more of these grimacing faces on beasts, goblins and demons. They

were enough to scare anyone who was alone there.

He paused and pulled his mobile phone out of his jacket. Network connection was there, albeit very weak. Bob felt like calling the First Investigator. Jupiter would be interested to hear about the statues, but less so for Pete as he was afraid of mythical creatures of all kinds. Bob didn't want to ruin Pete's surfing weekend, so he decided against sending them photos.

He was about to put his mobile phone back in his pocket when he heard a crackling sound in the undergrowth to his right. It was probably some kind of animal.

Bob let his eyes wander and saw a clay path leading diagonally into the forest. Suddenly he had an idea. He set the mobile phone to record and began speaking into it: "I'm standing in front of Mr Pinches's house... I'm recording a voice message for you, Jupe and Pete, so you can hear the exciting story of me feeding cats."

Bob paused the recording and stared at the ground. There were skid marks on the forecourt as if Mr Pinches had checked the functionality of his car before leaving... or had something run in front of his car?

"I see strange tyre marks on the forecourt," Bob muttered into the mobile phone. "—And I spotted a second driveway leading from the house into the woods."

He walked towards the clay path and bent down. "Tyre tracks here too, but quite washed out. I wonder why didn't Mr Pinches take the regular exit out. Where does this forest road lead to?"

Bob felt a slightly eerie feeling creeping up on him now, and speaking into the mobile phone gave him assurance. Somehow he didn't feel quite so alone anymore, even if that was ridiculous, of course.

At the same time, his investigation curiosity was aroused. He stepped closer to the tyre tracks, which was only indistinctly visible in the damp clay. It had probably been made before the rain.

"I'm going down the path into the woods now," Bob whispered into the phone. "I want to know where it leads to. It makes a turn... well another one... still the tyre marks are there. Strange, there seem to be footprints too—in some places anyway, where the rain wasn't so heavy—Hey!"

Bob turned around. Something had grabbed him by his jacket. He wanted to run, but he couldn't. Something was holding him down! Then, with a loud rattle, he suddenly stumbled forward. Just then, he managed to avoid falling. Breathing heavily, Bob stopped.

He reached to his side and felt that his jacket was torn at the level of his right pocket. Determined, he turned around. There was no one there! He looked back along the path. A few metres behind him, in the twilight, he could make out a piece of cloth dangling from a branch. Relieved, he exhaled.

"Sorry for the scare!" he gasped into his mobile. "Just got caught by a tree branch!"

It was his new summer jacket, of all things—the one he was so proud of. Bob took the few steps back to look at the scrap of fabric. Could it be sewn back on? But it had wrapped itself so tightly around the branch that Bob couldn't get it off. There would have been no point in taking the cloth to Aunt Mathilda anyway. The tear in the jacket was far too frayed to be mended.

Bob turned away and started walking again. It had become even darker.

"I'm walking on now," he spoke into his mobile phone. "Left and right bushes, undergrowth... behind... something shiny... It's... is it a car?" Bob faltered.

Indeed. A little way ahead of him, on the left-hand side of an embankment, was a dark-coloured car. However, the parking position was strangely unnatural. The front of the car

jutted so far up the slope that the rear had touched the ground. The two rear tyres were shredded, and the driver's door was open.

Cautiously, Bob approached the car. There seemed to be no one inside. He switched on the light of his mobile phone and shone it into the interior of the vehicle. There was nobody there. Apparently the driver had lost control of the car because of the blown tyres. He had gone off the road sideways and then rammed against the slope and ended up in a slanting position.

Bob described what he saw. Then he added: "There is no trace of the driver. He seems to have survived the accident unharmed—at least I don't see any blood. Then he must have walked away from the scene—perhaps in shock. The ignition key is still here. I see that the glove compartment is open... and empty. What about the boot?" Bob went to the rear. "It won't open. Locked or damaged by the accident."

Bob straightened up again and looked around. Somehow he had the feeling that he was being watched... but wasn't that always the case in such situations? He spun around once and winced. There was something big and dark a little further into the forest. It was upright and menacing, but it did not move.

Bob froze. He remained like that for several seconds. Then he realized that it must be a statue. He gathered his courage and walked a few steps towards it. It was indeed a demon statue, similar to the statues next to the house, but only bigger.

Darkly, it looked down at Bob. A dark witness—it ran through his head. It knew what happened to the car here... but it couldn't tell.

Bob decided that nothing held him here anymore. His job was to feed cats, not to stumble through the forest. He would just check briefly where this path led. Then tomorrow morning, he would send the voice message to his friends. If they wanted, Jupiter and Pete could give up their surfing weekend and investigate the crashed car with him. If so, he would have another problem—what would he do with Mary?

"The path now turns into a paved road," Bob said into his phone. "This in turn leads directly onto the road in the canyon. So it's kind of a second access road to the house."

Bob looked up and down the canyon. Just then a truck came crawling up the mountain, spewing a dark cloud of exhaust. Behind it was three cars with probably very annoyed drivers. As they crept past, Bob had to laugh a little at his excitement. As interesting as the discovery of the crashed car was, surely there was a simple explanation for everything—tyres shredded, off the road, and since time was of the essence, Mr Pinches had then taken a taxi to the airport and simply left his car here. Would this be worth sacrificing a surfing weekend? Pete would not forgive him for that.

Bob tried to shake off his thoughts and walked down the road until he reached the gate to Mr Pinches's mansion again. The distance was hardly more than a hundred metres. At least he had now got a good overview of the grounds.

For the second time that evening, Bob went up the driveway and around the bend towards the mansion, which now stood out black against the now almost dark night sky. Suddenly the light from a motion detector jumped on and illuminated the scene. Involuntarily, Bob had to grin. With this collection of demons, any burglar would lose the desire to enter the premises.

On a wooden stake was the skull with crossbones Lesley had mentioned. Bob stepped towards it. There was an opening at the back of the skull. He hesitated for a moment, but then courageously reached in. His hand gripped cool metal.

It was the key!

3. Hades and Kore

The wooden boards of the narrow verandah in front of the front door creaked with every step. Bob's hands trembled slightly as he slid the key into the lock. The door groaned softly as Bob pushed it open and then he slid inside.

He entered an anteroom, which he quickly crossed. The next room was dark. With his left hand, Bob felt for a light switch. A large chandelier flared up. Only with difficulty did its yellowish light illuminate the high living area, which was completely lined with dark wood panelling. Directly opposite the door, a wooden staircase led upwards.

Something rustled. It might be the cats, Bob thought, but he didn't see them. They were obviously hiding from him. Carefully he drew the air through his nose. It smelled musty and peculiar.

"I'm in the house now," Bob spoke into his phone. "You'd like it here, Jupe—dark, stale and kind of creepy. Again, there are strange statues all over the place."

Bob paused and looked more closely at the décor. In here, Mr Pinches's strange tastes continued. "There are paintings of plants on the walls. I think that one is wolf's bane," Bob continued talking, "and in this painting, I see a river with dragon-like creatures sticking their open mouths out of the water. On a pedestal, there is again a statue of the three-headed dog with a snake's tail. This one is smaller than that at the gate outside." Bob paced on. "The chairs... you won't believe it, their legs look like bones! And the ceiling lamp is a hanging figure of a devil whose eyes are red lights. That would be something for Uncle Titus. All could be highlights for his salvage yard!"

Again Bob heard a noise and when he turned around, he saw a grey tabby cat cautiously creeping towards him. Bob stopped the recording and bent down. The cat came closer, stroked around Bob and sniffed at him. Bob remained in his position and made no move to reach for the cat. She stroked around his knees and began to purr softly. "Good kitty, and where is your friend?" Now he stroked her gently and she let him.

That reminded Bob why he was actually here. Slowly he rose and looked around for the kitchen. But the cat was already showing him the way by striding towards a door on the right-hand side of the stairs. Bob followed the cat, opened the door and turned on the light.

Mr Pinches had not lived out his imagination in the kitchen. It was rustic and unobtrusively furnished. On the table top were several packets of cat food. Next to them were two small bowls. Between the bowls was a note. It said:

Hello Lesley!

In each packet, please give an equal portion to Hades and Kore in the morning, and the same in the evening. Put the bowls in the living room and remember to fill the water bowl with fresh water. If you have time, you can entertain them with some treats. Please always keep the kitchen door closed.

Thank you for your help!

A. Pinches

Aha, so the cats were named Hades and Kore. Bob guessed that he had met Kore, without being able to say exactly why.

“Kore,” he said, and repeated it. The cat meowed—but it was probably more because she wanted to eat than because she felt addressed by her name.

Bob put the front door key on the table, examined the food packets and decided on ‘beef in gravy’. Then he divided the contents equally between the two bowls. Kore kept stroking his legs. Gingerly he carried the food into the living room. As he stepped through the door, he saw Hades—a black tomcat, who looked at him closely from a safe distance with poison-green eyes. He wore a thin collar around his neck.

“Hades?”

The cat meowed. Bob felt confirmed—the black cat was Hades and the grey tabby Kore... and even if it was the other way around, it didn’t matter.

Bob put down the bowls, backed away a few steps and immediately the cats pounced on the food. He watched them eat. In less than two minutes, it was all gone.

He glanced at the clock. He still had a little time left but he suddenly felt like keeping the cats company. If necessary, he would have to hurry a little with the shower. “The cats are reasonably full,” Bob said contentedly into his mobile phone. “Job done... but I’m going to suck up to them a little more... with treats!”

The cats watched with hopeful glances as Bob headed back towards the kitchen. When he shook the dry food box, Hades could no longer be stopped either and stroked Bob’s legs, mewling.

Smiling, Bob went back into the living area. “I thought bacon was for catching mice?” he said, switching back to recording. “Hades and Kore are all excited. I reach into the food box and there—”

Bob hesitated and his voice became brittle. “There... Jupe, something’s moving! I... I think the devil, yes... the one above the table... with red eyes... it’s staring at me and—”

Bob’s breath quickened. “It’s glowing and... the devil’s coming off the ceiling! Jupe! Help! What have I got myself into? This cold breath I feel, where did it suddenly come from... The devil is floating towards me, Jupe!”

Bob’s voice trailed off. He made a strangled sound so that even the cats backed away.

Then he laughed out loud. “Just kidding, Jupe and Pete,” he shouted into the mobile phone. “Did I scare you, Pete? Sorry! Every scare has, as Jupe always say, a rational explanation. This one is simple—I made it up to scare you a little! A little entertaining element.” He laughed again. “But now I’m going to make the very un-scary cats happy!” He switched off the recording.

The cats had taken refuge from Bob’s screaming on the cupboard and dresser.

“Sorry, Hades and Kore, for scaring you—but it just had to be done. Jupe and Pete, you know, they’re my best friends, apart from you two of course. They love a good scare... but now it’s your turn, I promise!”

He put his mobile phone on the table under the devil figure, reached into the box and threw a treat across the room. Instantly, both cats sprinted after the food. Bob quickly threw a piece in the other direction under the table, so he now had the cats separated. Alternately, he fired here and there. The cats jumped up and tried to catch the food with their mouths.

“With me you’ll have a bit of variety,” shouted Bob, “and you’ll stay fit!”

It was really fun, but he had to leave some for tomorrow. Mary would definitely enjoy the feeding. Yes, Mary—Bob would bring her here.

“Well, that’s it,” shouted Bob. “Three more each!”

It was Kore's turn and Bob aimed particularly high. She caught the chunk. Now Hades. "Let's see what you're capable of!" Hades stared at Bob out of his poison-green eyes.

Bob threw two pieces at the same time, one Hades caught with his paw, the other bounced away on the ground. It slid behind the pedestal on which that stupid three-headed dog was sitting. Hades set after it and sniffed next to the pedestal. With his paw, the cat tried to get at his food, but it wasn't so easy. Somehow it was stuck. Bob watched curiously. He wanted to let the cat try a little before he came to help. Now Hades tried to squeeze himself between the pedestal and the panelled wall. Impatiently, he scratched at the pedestal with his paw, but still without success.

"All right, all right!" Bob stepped towards him. "I'll help you."

Then he heard a crack followed by a scraping sound. The cat backed away. The wood panelling behind the dog statue had moved! A dark crack became visible and quickly widened. "Hades, you haven't... Hey, did you trigger off something?" muttered Bob. The opening was now large enough for a human to go through.

"What is this?" Bob took a step forward, inadvertently knocking his foot against the food box he had placed on the floor. It slid away with a tinny sound.

Startled, Hades jumped into the dark opening. Bob rushed after the cat.

"Hey, Hades! Come out of there! Hades! Come back!" But the cat was gone. Kore had also disappeared elsewhere in the house.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Bob cursed softly. He stepped into the opening and looked in.

There was a dark passageway into which the light from the living room shone dimly. Where the passageway led, Bob could not see. There was no sign of the cat either.

Bob thought for a moment. This was not his house. He shouldn't be allowed in there... but after all, he couldn't leave Hades to his fate. Who knew where the cat went? What would Mr Pinches think if he came back and his cat was gone and the secret door was open? So there was no time to lose, or the cat could be over the hills!

Bob took a breath and stepped into the passageway. Cautiously, he felt his way along. After a few metres, he came to a staircase that led downwards and then ended at a steel door. The door was only ajar. Apparently Hades had slipped through. Cautiously, Bob pushed the door open further.

"Hades?" He heard a scraping sound, but it was coming from behind, from above. At that moment, Bob realized that he had made a mistake! The secret door in the panelled wall through which he had entered was about to close.

He turned around. As fast as he could in the darkness, Bob sprinted up the stairs, but it was too late. The door was already closing. Hectically, Bob scanned the walls and the floor, but he found no key, no button, no mechanism of any kind to open it again. In a mixture of disappointment and anger, he banged violently on the door. It was very solid.

"Mobile phone," Bob muttered in exasperation. "My mobile phone. I have to call Jupe and Pete!"

... But his phone was outside on the table.

So he was left with only option—go the other way to the steel door...

4. Surprise Guest

“There we go!” Satisfied, Jupiter slammed the door of the camper van they had borrowed from an acquaintance for the weekend. Swimming gear, surfboards and beach chairs were stowed away, as were the provisions and the bags of clothes.

Pete rubbed his hands in relief. Packing a camper van until late in the evening was not his thing. On the other hand, they could start bright and early in the morning—especially since the weather forecast had improved further.

“Diving goggles and a snorkel, just in case. Have you thought of everything?” asked Pete.

“Of course. I am Jupiter Jones. I have a list in my head. I work through it point by point. What is done is crossed off... and when there’s nothing left, then I’m done.”

“Does your list include... cherry pie?” Pete grinned.

“I’ll get it tomorrow,” Jupiter said in all seriousness. “It’s still in the fridge.”

“You really think of everything,” Pete noted, “especially food.”

“I could get it now and we’ll go straight away,” Jupe said. “In just over an hour we’ll be on the beach. We’ll sleep there and then we’ll wake up to the sound of the sea in the morning sun...”

Pete looked at Jupiter in a scrutinizing manner. Was that meant as a joke? “Why not, actually,” he said. “We’ll tell your aunt, though, or she’ll worry! It’s a real pity Bob’s not with us.”

“He should be having a nice chat with Mary now!” Jupe said.

“I think he’d rather lie around on the beach with us. Shall we call him to find out?”

Jupiter grinned. “Yes. Let’s give him a Cousin Mary break!” He pulled out his mobile and dialled Bob’s number. “No answer,” he said after a few moments. “Maybe they’re at the movies.”

Sardonically, Pete drew air through his nose. “So, I guess it’s goodbye to our friend for two days. Okay, who’s going to get the cherry pie, you or I?”

“I’ll get it,” Jupe decided, and hurried across the salvage yard to the Jones family home—a two-storey house situated just outside the salvage yard, with a small gate separating them.

In the kitchen, Jupiter spoke briefly with his aunt and she put the pie in a cooler for him. Then he came back to the yard.

Pete started the engine. There would not be much traffic at this hour. A pleasant and relaxed drive awaited them. While Jupiter pushed open the heavy main gate of the salvage yard, Pete turned on the radio and searched for the station with surf music. Then he set the camper van in motion.

He rolled through the gate—and immediately had to brake sharply! There was almost a crash. Jupiter had also just jumped to the side. Neither of them had expected the taxi that stopped directly in front of the entrance to The Jones Salvage Yard.

Cursing, the taxi driver got out and went to the boot. On the other side, a girl climbed out of the car. Pete recognized her immediately in the headlights. Mary! But why is she here? Wasn’t she with Bob?

She paid the taxi driver, which reassured the man somewhat. He placed her suitcase onto the sidewalk, gave Pete a critical look, got back behind the wheel and roared away shaking his head.

“What are you doing here?” asked Jupiter. “And where is Bob?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Mary said. “He was supposed to pick me up at the airport. That’s what he promised me! And he usually always does what he says. Always! But now, he didn’t even answer my call—and I called several times. Yes, I called him when I landed because my flight was delayed. Maybe he’s already left, I thought, or something came up. But why isn’t he answering his phone? Isn’t he with you—oh no!” She rolled her eyes. “He’s not?”

“I—” Jupiter began.

“Now we see each other once a year and then he’s not here. He hasn’t forgotten me, has he? I e-mailed him my arrival date and the flight time. He confirmed everything! And now he’s... Oh yes, hello Jupiter. Hello Pete! Good to see you!”

“Likewise...” Jupe mumbled.

“It’s so terrible that I now have to disturb you,” Mary rattled on. “I’m really sorry, but what can I do? I had absolutely no desire to wait at the airport. So I took a taxi went to his house, but there was nobody home! Then I got the taxi to bring me here—with the last of my money. Can you imagine that? He’s usually here with you, isn’t he? That’s when you solve your dangerous investigation cases, and—”

“Mary, please!” Jupiter hissed.

“Yes, I know, no one is supposed to know about your cases,” Mary lowered her voice, “but he did tell me about one of them—the case about a sunken village in Oregon? Oh my! That’s so exciting! And it was so close to Seattle—”

“Mary, hold on!” shouted Pete, who had got out from the camper van in the meantime. “What about Bob? Wasn’t he at the airport?”

“No! That’s what I’m saying! He—”

“And he hasn’t contacted you?” Jupe asked.

“No, Jupiter. Where am I supposed to stay now? I can’t fly back again! There’s nothing more I can do today... and what about him? I thought you could tell me. What’s going to happen now?”

“You come into my house for now,” Jupiter said firmly.

While Jupiter and Mary walked across the salvage yard towards the Jones family home, arguing fiercely, Pete backed the camper van and closed the gate.

No sooner had Jupe and Mary reached the house than Aunt Mathilda’s voice resounded from the kitchen window.

“Mary! Nice of you to drop in on us! Why didn’t you say that you are coming? Then I would have told you—”

“Oh, Mrs Jones! Bob was going to pick me up! And then he wasn’t there. I haven’t seen him. I can’t explain it either! I took a taxi here, and found that he’s not here either! I know it’s very late—”

Aunt Mathilda turned to Jupiter and Pete. “Are you in some kind of investigation again?”

“No,” cried Jupiter, “what makes you think of that?”

“Well, why Bob has disappeared then?”

“Honestly I don’t know...”

“This is typical of you! You’re so full of fantasies that you’re forgetting Bob’s cousin. Now come on in, Mary. Let’s have some warm soup for the fright!” Mathilda Jones waved Mary into the house, where she immediately directed her to the kitchen.

Jupiter stared at them. “We have to go to Headquarters urgently,” he said. His eyes flickered. Pete could not remember ever having seen Jupiter in such a state before.

They stepped through the Cold Gate. A few moments later, they were crouching in their trailer.

“We have to keep calm,” Jupe said. “Maybe there is a simple explanation for everything.”

“But Bob would have contacted us!” interjected Pete.

“Maybe he couldn’t,” Jupe surmised. “Perhaps he lost his phone or there was no connection.”

“An accident?”

“Then the police would have called.”

“But they would not have called us.”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter said. “Maybe he’s stuck somewhere and can’t get in touch.”

“We have to inform the police immediately!” said Pete.

“We can do that, but they won’t do anything immediately. Thousands of young people disappear every day and almost all of them turn up again.”

“But Bob is not a kid who had just disappeared.”

“We know that.”

“Call Inspector Cotta!”

Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department was an acquaintance, almost like a friend. He had helped The Three Investigators whenever he could in a benevolent but also critical way. Although he usually hid behind the façade of a grumpy inspector, Jupiter knew that when it came down to it, the inspector was always there for them.

“Maybe Cotta is already asleep,” Jupiter said, “but the matter is really important enough!”

Some time ago, the inspector had given them his private phone number, even though he had regretted it now and then. The Three Investigators had had to promise him that they would only use it in real emergencies. That was what it looked like now.

“Cotta?” It sounded sleepily from the phone after five rings.

“Jupiter Jones here.”

For a moment, nothing was heard. Then a groan. “What do you want? At this hour? I’ve had a hard day today, boys! I’m lying in bed. What is so important now?”

“Honestly, we don’t know, Inspector. But believe me, we wouldn’t be calling you so late if we weren’t worried. Bob has gone missing!”

“If I were to sound the alarm every time one of you disappeared from the scene, I would have to increase my staff tenfold! What kind of case are you in?”

“None at all. That’s just it! Otherwise we would worry less...”

Cotta yawned heartily. “Maybe Bob just fell asleep somewhere...”

“Inspector! Bob doesn’t just fall asleep somewhere when he’s supposed to pick someone up from the airport! And besides, all those calls would have woken him up long ago.” Jupiter briefly described the background of the situation.

But Cotta’s reaction was restrained. “You can lodge a report but I can’t do anything much at the moment. That should be clear to you, especially since there is no evidence of any crime. Now, because it’s you...”

“Yes?”

“And even though I’m actually off tomorrow, all I can do now is to inform a colleague to go through the current police reports—accidents and other incidents. If he notices anything, we’ll be in touch. I can also tell my people to keep their eyes open.”

“Thank you, Inspector. Really, this is more than I had dared to hope for.”

“You’re welcome, as always.” The policeman yawned. “What are you going to do next?”

“We are not sure yet, but we will inform you in due course,” Jupiter said. “We will begin our investigation where we last saw Bob—here at the salvage yard.”

“That’s a good start,” said Cotta, “but I would ask you one thing—don’t contact me again until tomorrow morning, because I really want to sleep now!”

“As you wish, Inspector. Good night,” Jupiter said and hung up. He looked at Pete. “I agree with you, Pete. Often enough I make the mistake of informing Inspector Cotta too late. At least, that’s not the case this time.”

5. Demons

“We’d best go to that cat house now,” Pete said nervously, “the one belonging to that... Mr Pinches. Maybe something happened to Bob there! Lesley has been there before and found the house... creepy!”

Jupiter nodded and took a flashlight from the shelf where they stored the equipment for their investigation work. “Step by step,” he said. “We don’t know if he even arrived at the house. I think it would be purposeful to follow his path closely—from the very beginning, as I told Inspector Cotta. Where did we last see Bob?”

“Here, at the salvage yard. We said goodbye to pick up the camper van. Bob then wanted to leave shortly afterwards.”

“And he should have taken his bike,” Jupiter said, “because he didn’t have his car here with him. So the first thing we’ll do is to see if his bike is still here.” They left Headquarters.

Bob usually leaned the bicycle against the wooden fence next to the main gate, but now it was not there.

“Okay, so he set off with it,” Jupiter said. “Then we’ll go over the route. Let’s assume for the moment that he chose the direct route to his destination. We’ll take the camper van!”

Just as they were about to enter the vehicle, Uncle Titus came into the yard from his house. The embers in his pipe glowed in the darkness. “Who have you dragged in?” he exclaimed when he spotted the boys. “That Mary talks without ceasing. Even your aunt has trouble making herself heard. I can’t even concentrate on the football game on TV anymore!”

“That’s unfortunate, Uncle Titus,” cried Jupiter, “but we’re looking for Bob. Did you notice when he cycled off?”

“You mean earlier today?” Titus said, smoking his pipe. “He didn’t cycle off.”

“What?”

“I’ve already told Mary that in the little time I got a word in between. Bob had a flat tyre on this bike and pushed it into your outdoor workshop and—”

“But Bob wanted to go to the canyon!” Pete exclaimed.

“I know. Now at least let me finish!” Uncle Titus said. “I also had to go up into the mountains to an estate of an antique collector. I reached there on the spur of the moment, but it was a complete disaster. There was nothing but crap! Rotten furniture, suitcases full of old, smelly clothes, records by bands that nobody wants to listen to. A colleague actually beat me to it and packed up all the treasures—except for a few pieces. Anyway, I left all the junk there.” He laughed. “Mathilda was very happy about that. It was all far too crowded in my neat storeroom anyway, she said. Incredible, isn’t it? Do you think so too?”

Jupiter stared at Titus in amazement. He didn’t usually talk so much. “Please get to the point, Uncle Titus. What do you know about Bob?”

“Well, I gave him a lift and dropped him off where he wanted to go.”

“And then?”

“I drove on. I saw him going across the road.”

Hope sprouted in Jupiter. “And did you pick him up later?”

Titus took a puff and shook his head. “He said he wanted to feed some cats and then walk back here. It’s not that far a walk. Of course, on the way back, I looked to see if he was along

the way, but I didn't see him."

Using a map, Uncle Titus pointed out to Jupe and Pete the place where he dropped Bob off.

"Thank you. You helped us a lot!" Jupiter and Pete swung into the camper van. "We're going to that house again to look for him!"

"Aren't you taking Mary with you?" Uncle Titus called out to them hopefully.

But the two investigators were already speeding off.

There were only a few cars on the road. Silently, Pete set course for the canyon. Jupiter said nothing either. His brain was running at full speed, Pete was aware of that, and it was better not to disturb the First Investigator while he was thinking.

Again and again they stared at the roadside to see if they could spot anything conspicuous, any clue... but there was nothing.

A little later, as Pete steered the camper van through the canyon, a book fell out of the rack when he made a sharp turn. It almost hit the Second Investigator in the head. With a sideways glance, he realized it was a book on human memory. "Is this for your weekend reading?"

"Sideline reading..."

"Ah," Pete remarked. "I prefer reading comics..."

"Just shut up, Pete, not another word! It was really a big exception that my memory failed me on the colour of the sales assistant's hair."

Pete had to grin. "So that's it! That really annoys you, doesn't it?"

"No," Jupiter replied a little too quickly. "I'm just generally interested in the workings of the human brain, its organization of perception and its creation of reality... but now we have a completely different challenge!"

"I'm afraid that's true." Pete put the book in the door tray. By now they were almost at their destination. He slowed down so as not to miss the entrance to Mr Pinches's house. "There's the boulder over there."

Jupiter nodded. "The camper van should still fit on the driveway."

Pete parked, they got out and took a deep breath. It was cool. A night bird made a warning call, and a light wind brushed through the forest. The first moths were already buzzing towards the camper cabin light, which Pete had left on to be on the safe side.

Jupiter immediately spotted the statue by the gate. "A three-headed dog. That must be Cerberus, the hound of Hades."

"Excuse me?"

"The hound who guards the gates of the underworld to prevent the dead from leaving," Jupe elaborated.

"I see..."

"We seem to be dealing with a certain obsession of Mr Pinches. I'm well aware that you don't like this reference to the underworld, Pete, especially not in the middle of the night... but still, I don't suspect anything at the end of the driveway other than a normal house."

"I certainly hope so... and a house with Bob in it intact!"

Jupiter switched on his flashlight. The gate was ajar and they slipped through.

"If Bob walked this way, he couldn't have left any tracks," Jupiter said, meticulously shining a light on the ground. "Paved path, even if it's a little crumbly... but we won't find any footprints here."

Slowly they walked forward. In the meantime, the moon had climbed over the ridge and bathed the scenery in its cool light. When, around a bend, the vegetation revealed a view of Mr Pinches's house, Jupe and Pete stopped, stunned. Against the bright moonlight, it looked like a dark castle whose window holes seemed to stare at them like dead eyes.

"I don't like this," Pete said.

"There's no light on inside," Jupiter said without answering Pete. "That speaks against Bob still feeding the cats there."

"I like that even less," said Pete. "I can't see clearly from here but what are those strange structures jutting out from the wall of the house?"

Jupiter walked a few steps further and shone his light on the protrusions from below. This made the structures look even more terrifying.

"Gargoyles," Jupiter said in a firm voice. "They remind me of the gargoyles they used to put on medieval churches, among other things to scare away evil demons." Glancing at Pete, he added: "Not you, Pete... I don't mean you."

"I don't know," Pete said, but his concern for Bob made him forget the horror he had felt at the sight of the house. "This is an underworld mansion... pretty creepy—as Lesley described it."

With a mixture of curiosity and fear, he looked around. Even without a flashlight, he noticed the white orb standing out clearly against the black of the house wall. "Is that the skull?"

"There on the pole?" Jupiter nodded and walked towards it. Bright light flared up and bathed the scenery in cold colours. Jupiter was startled for a moment until he realized that a motion detector had caught him. "Lesley said that the skull was supposed to contain the key," he said. "If that's no longer the case, there's a lot to be said for Bob still being somewhere here."

"You do it," Pete said. "Check for the key, I mean."

Jupiter shone the light on the skull. He spotted the opening and reached in. "There it is," he murmured in surprise, but also a little disappointed. "Apparently Bob had left the house and put the key back here... or... he wasn't in there at all!"

"Now what?" asked Pete, perplexed.

"We're bound to come across some clues," Jupiter said, holding the key in the air. "Let's go in!"

6. Monster Claws

The wooden boards of the narrow verandah in front of the entrance door creaked with every step. Carefully, Jupiter inserted the key into the lock and turned it. It clicked lightly.

“At least I don’t have to use my lock picks today,” Pete thought to himself as Jupiter pushed open the slightly groaning door and pushed his way inside.

They entered the anteroom, which they quickly crossed. It was dark in the next room, and it smelled musty and peculiar. With his left hand, the First Investigator felt for a light switch. A large chandelier flared up. Only with difficulty did its yellowish light illuminate the living area.

Suddenly there was a hissing sound. Out of the corner of his eye, Jupiter saw a grey tabby cat leap away and settle on a tall glass case full of demon statues. From up there, the cat watched the arrivals curiously.

When Pete also spotted the cat, he calmed down a little. He let his gaze wander. “Bob doesn’t seem to be here,” he muttered. “Anyway, I don’t like it here at all!”

Jupiter could understand that. “You’re impressed by all the demons, the pictures from purgatory and that big devil above the table.”

“Yes, and the creepily decorated chairs with bones for chair legs; the grotesque images on the walls; and then that mustiness hanging in the air; and it’s gloomy too. Let’s look for clues about Bob and get out of here as quickly as possible!”

Jupiter switched on his flashlight and shone it into the dark corners of the room, but discovered nothing conspicuous.

“Where’s the other cat?” asked Pete. “Lesley said there were two, didn’t she?”

“He probably took flight,” Jupiter speculated, “and hid somewhere here. There are plenty of places to hide. I haven’t yet seen a cat flap through which he could have got outside.”

Now his gaze fell on a door. He walked towards it and opened it. “Aha! The kitchen.”

Jupiter entered and Pete followed him. The First Investigator went to the table top. “Here’s a note from Mr Pinches,” he muttered, “on how to feed the cats.” Suddenly he laughed.

“What is it?” asked Pete.

“Hades and Kore—these are the cats’ names. He obviously has a sense of humour, this Pinches. In Greek mythology, Hades is not only the name of the ancient underworld itself, but also its god... and Kore is his wife. Very fitting for the ambience of this underworld mansion.”

“I can’t laugh about it like that.” Pete grabbed one of the two plastic bowls and sniffed them. “Hmm... this could have just been used. It’s still a bit damp, as if Bob washed them. Neat as ever!”

Jupiter nodded and opened the large dustbin that stood under the window. With a purposeful grip, he pulled out an empty cat food packet. “Beef in gravy,” he read out and smelled it. “Could be fresh. So presumably Bob was here! He fed the cats, cleaned everything up and left... but where did he go?” Jupe then wrapped the cat food packet in a handkerchief and gently put it in his pocket.

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “Shall we check outside again for traces?”

“We’ll do that in a minute,” Jupiter said, “but first we’ll have a look around inside!”

They left the kitchen. The grey tabby cat had moved to another spot. Only after searching for a while did Pete find that she was now sitting next to the three-headed dog on a pillar. “Cerbernut, the hound from hell,” Pete said proudly.

“Excuse me?” Jupiter was examining the devil figure above the dining table.

“Nothing,” Pete said.

“You said ‘Cerbernut’!” said Jupiter. “I heard it exactly... it’s Cerberus!”

“Okay, Juve. Cerberus it is. I’ll definitely remember that.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Jupiter remarked. “Is there a basement here?”

“I didn’t see anything leading down anywhere.”

“At least we’ll look upstairs while we’re there.” Jupiter pointed to the stairs leading to the first floor. “Together?”

“Yes,” said Pete. “I don’t go anywhere here alone.”

Next to the stairs was a toilet, which Jupiter also checked. Then they climbed up. On the upper floor, they quickly looked around and found a bedroom with an adjoining bathroom, a study, a storeroom, and two completely empty rooms—presumably guest bedrooms.

The two investigators entered the storeroom first. Between old chairs, two large travel trunks were gathering dust, from which old clothes were spilling out. Broken lamps were stored in a box, and heavy picture frames were leaned against the wall. Jupiter blew on a vase and the swirling dust obscured their view for a moment and made them sneeze.

The two of them could have stayed here for hours as there was so much to discover, but there was no time for that today. They left the room and went to the study next. The bookcase there was worth a longer look for Jupiter... and the desk. It looked reasonably tidy. The papers were arranged in small piles. There was a multi-tiered wooden shelf and the pens were all in a black leather box embossed with a skull and crossbones.

“I don’t know if we’re allowed to rummage around here,” Pete urged. “These are Mr Pinches’s private things. Presumably the man had nothing to do with Bob’s disappearance! Bob fed the cats, went outside, put the key back and then something happened.”

“Look at the documents here,” Jupiter said. “Here is a letter from a lawyer. There’s been trouble over the boundary of his property. A certain Nathalie Baker is his neighbour, and her son Cassius apparently likes to roam around here uninvited.”

“Juve...”

Ignoring Pete, the First Investigator continued: “Here’s a postcard from a ship with greetings from a person named Carter... Mr Pinches’s first name is Allister. Then there are bills upon bills... again and again, Pinches bought art objects—lots of stuff relating to the Middle Ages.”

“Juve, we’re leaving! This is none of our business. If Pinches comes home and catches us here—”

“Pinches is away for a few days, Pete,” Juve argued. “Besides, we have a reason for our activities—we’re looking for Bob! Let’s not waste too much time. Check out this newspaper article—Allister Pinches gave a guest lecture at Ruxton University on the history of the underworld.” Jupiter looked at the photo next to the text, which showed a nondescript, slightly stooped man behind a lectern. He folded up the paper and pocketed it. “Perhaps this picture will be useful to us. When we find Bob, he can put this article back on the table.”

After Jupiter and Pete had also inspected the bedroom and the bathroom without finding any trace of Bob, they descended the stairs again and left the house. None of the cats had shown themselves again.

They stood on the forecourt, somewhat perplexed. In his hand, Juve was playing with the front door key they had found in the skull. "Why did Bob put the key back?" he asked suddenly.

"The key?"

"Yes! He could have kept it until he fed the cats again, couldn't he?"

"Bob is too neat for that," Pete reflected, "or he thought maybe someone else would like to come into the house—the cleaning lady or someone."

"Maybe. We don't know." Juve deposited the key back in the skull. "Now we're at our wit's end. If we don't find anything out here, we can look everywhere in Rocky Beach and on and on beyond that!"

"There'll be no end to it," Pete commented. "I'm dog-tired, but I hardly think I'll be able to sleep tonight!"

Juve pulled out his mobile phone. "Maybe there's a message from Bob," he muttered. "No reception out here!" he said disappointedly. He put the phone away again, switched on his flashlight and shone the light on the ground for traces.

Meanwhile, Pete tried to accustom his eyes to the moonlit surroundings. He succeeded quite well. "Maybe the other cat got away and Bob was looking for it outside," he said.

"In such a situation, he wouldn't have put the key back..." Juve surmised. "In fact, he can look for the cat out there for a long time. It's also possible that he didn't find the cat and gave up."

Step by step, he walked down the forecourt. "It's driving me crazy that we're not coming up with anything concrete!"

"There's another path over there," Pete said suddenly, pointing to an area of trees and bushes. "Shall we investigate that one? It can't do any harm, can it?"

"Go ahead then, Pete, I'll finish searching the forecourt."

"Alone?"

"Oh Pete! In such a situation, we have to cover the grounds as much as possible and not waste any time."

Pete gasped for breath. He had a rough idea of what Juve meant by that. "All right," he said, glancing at the dark path that was lost in the thicket after only a few metres. "But you'll come immediately if I call out!"

"What's supposed to be waiting for you in the forest? A monster?"

"Yes, monsters..." Pete said sullenly, "many of them—each with many heads."

Instead of commenting, Juve bent down to take a closer look at a bright spot on the paved surface.

"Okay, Pete is very brave today," the Second Investigator said to himself and started moving. Indeed, a loamy path began here, leading into the forest.

With his mobile phone, Pete shone his light ahead, as the power of the moonlight was fading fast in the leafy forest. It went around a bend and Pete held the phone down. There were tyre tracks, and also footprints in the clay, presumably of two people. Pete's blood rushed to his head—some of the prints could actually be from Bob's sports shoes! Pete recognized the pattern.

Tense, he ran on—around another bend, past large bushes. Then Pete froze. He saw a car... at the side of the road, in the dark. Everything looked very strange. The front of the car was up a slope, and the driver's door was open. Had there been an accident? With Bob? Or Mr Pinches?

At first Pete wanted to run back to Juve, but then his curiosity won out. Step by step, he walked towards the vehicle. He now held the mobile phone in his hand like a weapon,

ready for anything. He approached the back of the car, noticed in dismay that the tyres were shredded, and then moved sideways along the car until he could shine through the passenger window into the interior.

At that very moment, a ghastly face sprung up behind the glass! Deathly pale in the light of the mobile phone, the facial expression distorted into a scream. On either side of the grimace, hands shot up, fingers splayed like claws as if to seize Pete. Like an attacking animal, they scratched wildly at the glass.

Pete cried out, turned and ran.

7. Serious Deductions

After a few metres, Jupiter came running towards the Second Investigator. “What happened, Pete?”

Behind him, Pete heard a thud. Branches cracked. “A... monster,” he stammered, “a demon, ghost... I don’t know what! It was just horrible!”

“Where?” Jupe asked.

“There! By the crashed car!”

“Car? What kind of car?” Jupiter wanted to run ahead. “Show me!”

“No!” cried Pete. “I don’t want to go there again!”

“Yes!”

“Jupe, please...” Pete’s voice sounded pleading.

“Then wait here...”

“Alone? I think you’re crazy. There’s a terrible monster lurking in that car!”

They pricked up their ears. By now there was no sound.

“I hope you chased it away,” said the First Investigator, “whatever it was.” He started moving in the direction Pete had come from.

Pete sighed. If he didn’t want to stay behind alone, he had no choice but to follow Jupiter.

“Oh,” he then gasped.

“What is it?” shouted Jupiter from the front.

“There’s something hanging there,” Pete said. “Probably... just a scrap of cloth.”

“Come on now, Pete,” Jupe urged. “No time to waste!”

“Wait a minute, Jupe. This could be interesting!”

Immediately Jupiter turned around.

With his mobile phone, Pete shone the light on a branch where the scrap of cloth was hanging.

Jupiter looked at the piece. With audible surprise in his voice, he said: “This could be from Bob’s jacket! It’s the same colour combination—green with a grey stripe!”

“It’s his new favourite jacket,” Pete added. “He had it with him today.”

“That means that Bob was here,” Jupiter said thoughtfully, “and where is that car now?”

“Not so loud, Jupe.” Soothingly, Pete waved his hands. “The car is back there, but I’ve seen other things! There are shoe prints on the path. They match Bob’s sports shoes!”

“That’s more than a coincidence,” Jupiter muttered.

Cautiously, the two boys walked deeper into the forest. After a few metres, the light from Jupiter’s flashlight hit the shiny black paintwork of the car.

“Looks like an accident,” said the First Investigator in a hushed voice, “and where was the monster?”

“In the back seat.”

In a bent posture, Jupiter crept up to the vehicle. Then he abruptly straightened up and shone his light into the interior of the car. “Nothing,” he said with relief.

“But there was something just now!” cried Pete.

“Anyway, it’s gone now.”

“The driver’s door,” Pete began, “it was open a moment ago!”

Jupiter nodded. He turned around and pointed the flashlight at the surroundings, but he couldn't see anything unusual—except for a large stone sculpture that stood a few metres off the path and gave them a brief fright. It was a demon, gazing silently down at everything. “A dark witness,” Jupiter said, “but silent, I’m afraid.”

“Maybe the accident has something to do with that horrible statue,” Pete whispered. “A curse or something.”

“Pete,” was all Jupiter said.

He made his way through the bushes and shone his light on the statue from close by. When he found nothing conspicuous, he turned back to the car and aimed the light once more into the interior.

“The ignition key is missing,” Jupiter noted. “Glove compartment opened and empty. The car seems to have gone off the road and got stuck.”

“The rear tyres are shredded!” said Pete. “Maybe a sharp stone or something, but why both of them?”

“Hmm...”

“Were they shot?” asked Pete.

Jupiter looked at the tyres. “It’s hard to say. It’s possible, of course.”

Since they didn’t find anything more from the car, Jupiter continued to search on the ground.

“A whole jumble of tracks,” he said. “There must have been at least three people here—one of them possibly Bob. I wonder what happened here?”

Jupiter asked Pete to wait aside so as not to render the tracks useless. Then he examined metre after metre after metre, disappearing for quite a while even out of Pete’s sight. After what seemed like endless minutes, he told the Second Investigator to come to him.

“Here’s the thing,” Jupiter explained, pointing widely at the earth. “Some of the footprints overlay others. From this I can make out the chronological sequence. The following picture emerges—at least one person was sitting in the car. A second followed the car on foot. Then came Bob, whose footprints are, with one exception, the freshest. It seems to me that the first two are from before and Bob’s from after the rain.

“The driver left the car and continued walking down the path, away from the house. The second person and then Bob followed him. At the end, however, again one person ran after Bob for a few metres and then turned off to the side into the thicket, where the trail is lost.”

“That’s really some serious deductions by you,” Pete said full of admiration, “but what does all this tell us?”

“From now on, it becomes speculation,” Jupiter explained. “When Bob finished feeding the cats and put the key back, he must have observed something. In any case, he was here and gave chase.”

“Maybe he was abducted,” Pete said.

“I don’t think so. The tracks tell me he was walking alone. There was no one right next to him or behind him.”

“What if he was threatened with a gun?” Pete wondered. “You were talking about a person who followed Bob.”

“Well, I guess it was much later in time,” Jupe continued. “By then the ground had become even drier. The person in question ran to the car, got in, or at least looked in, and then ran away from here. Let’s assume that your monster was not a ghost, but a human being, for example, a person wearing a mask, then the traces must have come from this person. Otherwise, the monster would have vanished into thin air. I don’t believe in that, as you

know. It's only been a few minutes since the supposed ghost frightened you—which in turn means that Bob was chasing the other two alone."

Pete nodded, impressed. "Somehow that gives me confidence, Juve."

"Me too... but why hasn't he contacted us then? And what was he following here? Was Mr Pinches in the car?"

"Let's just keep following the tracks until they end at something that gives us more clues," Pete suggested.

"That would be too good!" Jupiter said. "Just ahead, the path turns into a paved road that meets the main road a little further on. There are no more footprints there. Of course, we'll have another good look at everything, but I'm afraid this is where our trail gets lost."

Jupiter took down the car's licence plate number and then asked Pete to walk with him further down the road. As suspected, they did not come across any further clues. Lost in thought, the two investigators walked down the valley until they reached their camper van again.

"It's late," Jupiter said with a glance at his watch. "There's nothing more we can do here. Let's go home now. Tomorrow morning I'll call Inspector Cotta and tell him about the car. Surely he can tell us the owner."

"Is that all we can do?"

"No, Pete. We will investigate in all directions. First of all, that means making phone calls to Lesley, Bob's parents, and the police. We'll visit Mr Pinches's neighbours. They may have seen or heard something, and I'll check on Pinches himself. Do some research—what is he like, is he possibly a criminal?"

On the way back, Jupiter and Pete made a diversion to the Andrews family home. As expected, the windows were dark and constant ringing had no effect.

A few minutes later, Jupiter worriedly pushed open the gate to the salvage yard. Pete let the camper van roll over the gravelly surface of the forecourt. The light was still on in the Jones family home. Aunt Mathilda stepped out of the house, alarmed by the sound of the engine. "Oh, it's you! At last!"

"Did you find Bob?" Close behind her Mary came running. "I'm so worried! We're all so worried. This is no way for him to annoy me like this!"

"Annoy you?" asked Jupiter in amazement.

"Yes, he annoyed me... by calling me 'Sue', as if we haven't known each other for years! We visit each other all the time! After all, Bob's been to my place in Seattle a few times! And we didn't just twiddle our thumbs. We saw the whole city—well, almost. I took him to all the sights! And we went to the movies and—"

"—Come inside first," interrupted Uncle Titus, who had also stepped outside.

"We did try to call you! But we couldn't get through!" Mary continued undaunted. "Was your phone switched off or was it bad reception wherever you were? That's when we started to worry not only about Bob but about you two, didn't we, Aunt Mathilda?"

Mathilda energetically pushed Jupiter through the door. "If a hair fell out of my head every time you couldn't be reached by phone, I'd have been bald for years," said Aunt Mathilda. "It was obvious that something would go wrong one day with your investigation games! At some point all luck runs out!"

"It's not about an investigation game!" Jupiter argued. "It's different from usual. We don't understand it all ourselves."

“You don’t understand something?” asked Mary. “Did I hear you correctly? Jupiter Jones doesn’t understand something? That’s new to me...”

“We don’t understand because we’re not working on a case right now...” Jupiter said gruffly. By now they had reached the living room. “What did you just say, Mary? Bob called you ‘Sue’? It seems to me that we are not up to date yet! Can anyone tell me what is going on?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you all this while!” cried Mary. “You just don’t let me get a word in. You got a message from Bob!”

8. A Message from Bob

A message from Bob? Pete and Jupiter looked at each other, puzzled. "And you're only saying that now?" Jupe asked.

"There hasn't been a chance so far—" Uncle Titus tried to interfere, but in vain, because now Jupiter was getting into the swing of things.

"Why didn't you call us? What's this message? What did Bob say? Most of all, Mary, how do you even know if the message is for us?"

Mary gasped for breath.

"We tried to call you," Aunt Mathilda reminded him, but Jupiter didn't listen to her at all.

"Can you answer my questions?" he demanded.

"That's what we're doing!" cried Uncle Titus. "We had to open the envelope because you were not here."

Mary held a piece of paper under Jupiter's nose. "We received this!"

With a trembling hand, Jupiter took the paper. He read:

Hello Jupiter and Pete,

Sorry for not getting back to you. Lost mobile phone. I have been in pursuit of a car thief and can only quickly pass this letter on to you. I'll get back to you when everything is sorted out. Don't worry. Got to go now.

Bob

PS: Give my love to poor Sue who waited in vain for me at the airport. I owe her one!

"This is clearly his writing," said Pete, who had been bending over the sheet.

Jupiter nodded.

"A investigation story after all," said Aunt Mathilda.

"At least nothing happened to Bob," added Uncle Titus.

"And there you have it in black and white," Mary shouted between them. "Bob called me 'Sue'! 'Poor Sue' too!"

"Quiet now!" roared Jupiter.

For a second, there was dead silence. Only a clearing of Uncle Titus's throat could be heard.

"How did you find the letter?" Jupiter then asked, adding: "You don't usually go to the letterbox in the middle of the night."

"Bob rang the bell," Uncle Titus said quietly.

Jupiter looked up. "Did you see him?"

His uncle shook his head. "When I got to the door, all I heard was a car driving away with its tyres screeching. It must have been him, right?"

"And then you went to the letterbox?"

"No," Titus said. "The envelope was placed under a stone on the doormat."

"When was that?"

"Probably about half an hour ago..." Titus replied.

“I must have both at once—the envelope and the stone!”

“Of course,” Uncle Titus said.

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter held all the pieces in his hand. “The two of us have to work on this!” he said with a glance at Pete. “Can I request the rest of you go to sleep. It might be a while. Mary can stay in the spare room, can’t she, Aunt Mathilda? And Mary, if it makes you feel any better, Bob doesn’t know any ‘Sue’—not that we know of.”

Under the astonished looks of the others, Jupiter and Pete retreated to Headquarters. There, Jupiter laid the pieces of evidence on the table in front of him.

They worked until their eyes glazed over with tiredness and Jupiter simply fell asleep with his head on the table top. Pete, who was sitting on the armchair, was still peripherally aware of it. Then he too had fallen asleep.

At least they had gained some insights. Bob had indeed been in the house and fed the cats. His fingerprints on the cat food packet proved it. Apart from that, the packet gave no other usable traces. Bob’s letter also had fingerprints—in addition to his own, those of Aunt Mathilda and Titus, which Jupiter had in his comparison archive, as well as those of an unknown person, who by all logic had to be Mary. The same applied to the envelope. The stone, however, did not provide any further information.

This could all be interpreted in one way or another. What was decisive was the method of delivery and the content of the letter. Bob would certainly have revealed himself to Uncle Titus in some way under normal circumstances. Also, Jupiter interpreted the change of Mary’s name to ‘Sue’ was Bob’s clear indication that something was wrong with the letter!

“He is skilled...” Bob recalled to himself the events of the past few hours. “Very skilled... Wore latex gloves so there would be no fingerprints of his on the paper... Dictated to me word for word the text he wanted me to write, so I couldn’t put in a clue.

“However, I was smarter. How lucky I was that I had told him beforehand that I had to pick someone up from the airport—my cousin ‘Sue’. It came to me spontaneously how I cooked up a different name for my cousin. Intuition? Maybe... because I didn’t want him to know too much and implicate other people, especially my cousin.

“Anyway, when the letter was ready, I looked at the man questioningly, but I did not say anything...

““What?” he asked. ‘What were you going to say?’

““Nothing,’ I said.

““Say it!’

““Really nothing! It’s all good.’ I smiled at him.

““I bet your friends will wonder how you could so easily forget about picking up that girl from the airport! Is that so?’

“I puckered my mouth.

““And they will suspect,’ he continued, ‘that there is something wrong with the letter.’

“I said hastily: ‘There’s no need to mention my cousin, really!’

““Keep writing...’ he continued, ‘PS...’

“Then he dictated the postscript. I couldn’t have formulated it better... so I wrote it on the bottom of the page—as directed by the barrel of his weapon...”

A loud groan woke Pete. It came from Jupiter.

The First Investigator stretched and stretched. “Everything hurts me,” he complained, “shoulder, back, head, arms... Oh, what time is it? After eight already?”

"I usually roll over again at this hour," Pete muttered and yawned. "—At least at the weekend." Then he remembered: "But Bob's missing!"

"Yes," said Jupiter. "Bob's missing." He searched the table with his eyes until they stopped on a small piece of paper. "My plan is to call Cotta, Lesley, and Bob's parents; then visit the neighbour and the bookshop."

"Why the bookshop?" asked Pete.

"Have Mr Smith tell us everything he knows about Pinches. Usually the customers of a small bookshop are very talkative. Such shops can be largely underrated sources of information."

"I see," said Pete. "What else?"

"Check the licence plate number, check on Pinches on the Internet... search everything again in daylight—the house, surroundings, path, car, and finally, feed the cats." He laughed forcedly.

Pete stretched his arms and back. "That's a thousand things."

"We are just investigating in all directions," Jupiter said. "I've already considered that. We'll split up. You take the neighbour. As we know, she and Pinches are at loggerheads over the demarcation of the property. Besides, her son keeps prancing around on Mr Pinches's property. Maybe he saw something. I stay here, check on the Internet and make the phone calls. Then I'll meet you at the bookshop."

Pete yawned. "All right." He got up, grabbed a soda and a chocolate bar for breakfast and headed out.

"And if anything important comes to light, let me know!" Jupiter called after his friend. Then he switched on the computer. While it was booting up, Jupiter thought about what he wanted to say to Inspector Cotta.

Suddenly he heard someone banging on something outside. The Cold Gate! Someone was banging on the Cold Gate!

Jupiter rushed out of the trailer, slid open the back wall of the fridge, and then the front door.

"Mary!"

"I..." Mary began. "I was around here... next to the storeroom and saw Pete come out of this fridge. It's really a great secret passage to your hideout!"

"What?" asked Jupiter irritably. "This is a restricted area! What do you want here?"

"I want to help you—to search for Bob!"

"We can do that on our own."

"Really? Do you have a lead?"

"I thought you were mad at him because he can't even remember your name? And now you want to help us?"

"Well..." said Mary, "I think that was deliberate."

"What?"

"Bob referring to me as 'Sue' was telling us that he didn't write the letter voluntarily. May I come in?"

Jupiter squirmed. "No! We have strict rules here that outsiders are not allowed in!"

"Yeah, suit yourself," Mary said, "but I still want to help you find Bob."

"Then let's go to the camper van," Jupiter decided.

They made their way to the camper van and got in. Mary sat down on a bench in front of Jupiter.

"Hey, you don't like me, do you?" she asked the First Investigator.

"Well... er..."

"I wonder why... Maybe because I talk so much?"

"Well..." Jupiter cleared his throat. "Yes," he admitted. "So it is."

"Not many people tell me that," Mary was silent for a moment. "At least you're honest. I don't really want to talk that much, you know..."

"I really need to move on now," Jupiter declared, looking at her sitting there so sorrowfully. Then he changed his mind. "I have a theory why you talk so much," he said, "but I'll tell you another time."

She looked up. "Tell me now."

Jupiter formulated haltingly: "Because... because you are insecure. The more insecure you feel, the more you talk... and yet—"

"No!"

"I'm sorry. I guess that was a little too direct."

She took a breath. "It's all right, it doesn't matter... but I really want to help you, and I promise—I will reduce my verbosity by fifty percent!"

"Seventy-five," Jupiter said, grinning.

"Sixty!"

"Seventy! Okay, maybe you can really do something because we've got our hands full and we're running out of time. It's a job where you have to talk very little and listen a lot though!"

"Okay..." Mary said suspiciously.

"There is a bookshop called Booksmith here in Rocky Beach. Go there and ask the owner, Mr Smith, for information about Mr Pinches." Jupiter briefly explained the background. "Ask him about anything that he knows of that man."

"And how am I supposed to do that? He doesn't even know me."

"Think of something..." Jupe suggested, "perhaps mention Bob... or us. Mr Smith knows us very well."

"Okay. I will!"

After Mary left, Jupiter returned to Headquarters, sat down at the phone and dialled Inspector Cotta's number.

9. The Stolen Car

Pete decided to go by bike. He felt like exercising and it wouldn't take him long to cycle to his destinations. Since he rode alone, he didn't have to take into account the pedalling speed of Bob and especially Jupiter, who got slower the steeper the uphill it went.

The Second Investigator quickly reached the gate of the Pinches mansion. The dense vegetation made for a gloomy impression even during the day. However, the mansion with the demon statues was not Pete's goal now. He winked at the stone hound from hell and continued to pedal hard. Three or four more bends and he would have reached the neighbour's house. Jupiter had impressed upon him the names—Nathalie Baker and her son Cassius.

When the Mrs Baker's property came into view, Pete saw that something must have happened there.

A police car was parked in front of the driveway. The Second Investigator slowed his pace. It was the sheriff's car. The officer had got out. Next to him was a man in a white T-shirt and jeans, gesticulating wildly. Pete glanced over briefly and cycled a few metres further as if unconcerned.

"I have no idea when this happened!" he heard the man said. "I just came out of the house earlier. Didn't I already told you everything? So, when I got out here, my car was gone!"

"Why didn't you park right in front of the house?"

"I always park it here! Have you seen the gravel driveway? The poor tyres! Does it matter where I park?"

"All right," the sheriff replied, annoyed. "So let's start again—it was a white Toyota... Hey, what are you doing here?" The sheriff had spotted Pete, who was now pushing his bike towards the two men.

"I want to see Mrs Baker," Pete said as normally as he could, adding: "Rather, her son, Cassius!"

"Are you one of the guys he hangs around with?" the man in the white T-shirt grumbled and eyed him. "Well, go on in. You know the way, don't you?"

"Uh, yeah, thanks!" Pete locked the bike next to the entrance and went through the gate.

After walking along a stony path, he quickly reached a clearing where a simple American wooden house stood. Compared to the underworld mansion he had seen last night, it looked really inviting. The smoky voice of a woman singing a radio hit sounded from the house.

Pete rang the doorbell, footsteps approached without the singing stopping. Only when the woman opened the door did the singing stop. "Herb, did you... Hey? Who are you?"

"Pete Crenshaw. Sorry to bother you."

"Are you the car thief?" She laughed so boomerily that her dreadlocks danced. Visually, the African-American woman would have made a super soul singer with her radiant face and colourful dress—if she wasn't already one.

"You know, my friend's car was stolen last night—an old Toyota. I'm sure it wasn't hard, because the key was stuck—" she said followed by another fit of laughter. "The key has been stuck in the ignition lock for years! Now tell me—who wants an old crate like that?"

Without waiting for an answer, she continued: "But I suppose you want to see Cassius, even though you seem much too old for him. Are you perhaps the new buddy mentor or something like what they've just introduced at school?"

"Actually, I'd like to speak to both of you."

"Hmm... that sounds official!" She grinned and showed her flashing white teeth.

"A friend of mine is missing," Pete continued. "We suspect it has something to do with your neighbour."

"With Mr Pinches? Yeah, anything's possible with him! Come in first..." The house was simply and tastefully furnished. On one wall, there were photos of Mrs Baker as a singer in a gospel choir. Cassius, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

The woman pointed to a worn white sofa. "So, what's this about?"

"I don't know Mr Pinches. He seems a little cranky to me. Among other things, he has this strange... let's say, hobby."

"You mean the demons and the hell stuff? Indeed! It's a strange house... but I don't know much about that. The guy hardly ever talks anyway, and certainly not to me since I've been fighting with him over part of the property. Herb wants to build a pool there for Cassius and me. That's the corner Mr Pinches took illegally, you know."

"I heard about it—" Pete began but was abruptly interrupted.

Suddenly, there was a horrible scream right next to him: "Aaaargh!"

Pete wheeled around and stared into a ghastly mask.

"Aaaargh!" it came again.

"Cassius!" cried Mrs Baker. "Take that thing off! How many times do I have to tell you?"

Guiltily, the boy took the mask off his face. "I'm just playing."

"You have no business there, Cassius!" Mrs Baker rolled her eyes in mock reproach.

"You gave me quite a scare, you little monster!" continued Pete.

"You too," Cassius replied, pointing at Pete. "Mum! He's the one at 'Mr Hellister's' car yesterday!"

Mrs Baker shook her head disapprovingly. "We only call Mr Pinches that when it's just the two of us, Cassius."

Pete looked at the boy. "Aha! So last night, you're the one inside the car!" Pete snapped. He almost had to laugh.

"Yes," the boy replied. "You frightened me with your scream!"

"And did you say that the car that you... uh... played in, is Mr Pinches's car?" Pete asked.

"Yes."

"His only one?"

"Yes."

"Apparently it went off the road. Did you perhaps notice anything about what happened to the car?" Pete probed.

Cassius shook his head. "By the time I got to the car, there was nobody there. It was late after our dinner—"

"You were still out after dinner?" exclaimed Mrs Baker, though only moderately surprised. "You were supposed to go straight to bed!"

"I couldn't sleep and there—"

"Cassius," Pete intervened curtly, "do you know anything about the people, for example friends, relatives, who have visited Mr Pinches from time to time?"

"Is he allowed to ask that?" Cassius asked his mother.

“Well... he’s looking for his friend,” Mrs Baker said. “It’s good if you could help, Cassius.”

“There’s no one anyway,” Cassius explained, “except that one man who’s always there.”

“He means Carter Bridou,” said Mrs Baker. “He seems to be an old friend of Mr Hellister’s and he sometimes looks after the cats.”

“Now you’ve said ‘Hellister’ too!” Cassius barked.

“Pete will understand.” Mrs Baker smiled.

Pete grinned back. “Hellister fits quite well, considering the house and its special furnishings. Back to this friend you told me about, this Mr Bridou, do you know why he wasn’t looking after the cats these past few days?”

“He isn’t? Maybe he’s not around,” Cassius said. “Maybe he’s on his yacht. He talks about that sometimes. He’s a captain and he’s been all over the world, even Santa Barbara!”

“Do you know where he lives?” asked Pete with a grin.

Cassius shook his head. “I don’t know the name of the town, but it’s a port in the direction of San Francisco,” he said, “not so far away.”

Pete made a few notes, thanked him for the information and the next moment, the boy disappeared to the back of the house.

“Wouldn’t you like a drink?” asked Mrs Baker. “Coke?”

Pete shook his head. “Thank you, but unfortunately I have to go.”

Mrs Baker accompanied Pete to the door. “How did your friend go missing?” she asked.

“He was supposed to feed the cats and didn’t come back.”

Mrs Baker smiled at Pete. “Well, take good care of yourself. Hellister has already sent someone to prison once.”

Pete listened up. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a rumour. We don’t know anything for sure. Anyway, good luck with the search! If I hear anything, how do I contact you?”

Pete reached into his pocket and pulled out the business card of The Three Investigators and handed it to Mrs Baker. The card said:



“Our contact details are on the back of the card,” Pete added.

“Investigators, huh?” Mrs Baker remarked. “And now you are investigating your missing friend...”

“Yeah, it happens that the missing friend is actually one of us...” Pete replied. “Bob Andrews.”

“All right,” Mrs Baker said. “I’ll let you know if I hear something.”

“Thank you!” Pete said and then ran to his bike. On the way, he received a text message from Jupiter telling him to go straight back to the salvage yard.

Just as he pocketed the mobile phone, he bumped into Herb, Mrs Baker’s friend.

“Visit over already?” the man asked.

Pete nodded. "I heard that your car was stolen. Do you know anything about when it happened? Could the theft have happened last night?"

The man looked at him. "What's it to you?"

"Well," Pete searched for words. "Yesterday... My friend was around here—"

"Is he behind this?"

"No," Pete said firmly. "No! Bob would never steal a car. Never! I just mean maybe he might have seen something. He was at Mr Pinches's house for a while yesterday."

"With that idiot neighbour? Well, ask him what he saw. Yes, last night is possible. I got here just before sunset."

"Will do." Pete nodded and continued towards the road.

The police car was gone. By now the sun was blazing down from the sky. Pete unlocked his bike, swung onto the hot saddle and zoomed down the canyon.

10. Mary Helps Out

As Pete rode into the salvage yard, he saw Jupiter and Mary sitting on the verandah of the yard office. He braked sharply and parked his bike next to the camper van.

Strangely, the two were not arguing. Mary had her legs crossed, her arm resting on the back of the chair and was listening to Jupiter. Pete had not remembered the girl as being so pretty, and he was even more astonished to discover that she and Jupiter made quite a passable picture together—too passable, in his opinion.

Jupe had long since spotted Pete and waved him in impatiently. “You just can’t rely on the police!” he shouted.

“Why?” Pete sat down next to him.

“I shouldn’t have told Inspector Cotta about the letter. Now he thinks that if Bob has come forward, there’s hardly anything he can do—officially, at least. Of course, he has informed his colleagues. They all have Bob’s picture on their mobile phones, and of course they will keep their eyes open.”

“That’s nice,” Pete said and turned to Mary. “By the way, why are you so unusually quiet now?”

“She’s working on her seventy percent,” Jupiter said. Mary and he grinned at each other—almost a little conspiratorially.

“What seventy percent?” asked Pete.

“I’m helping to find Bob,” Mary said instead of an answer. “—And I was at Booksmith a while ago.”

“What are you doing, Jupe?” asked Pete. “You told me to go to the bookshop... Since when—”

“We have a lot to do and there’s not enough time,” Jupiter interrupted casually. “Mary spoke to Mr Smith and managed to take a look at the invoices issued to Allister Pinches.”

Mary nodded. “Yes, Mr Smith was desperate to get rid of me! Okay, so what I found out was that Mr Pinches has been interested in antiquarian auction catalogues, literature about ancient history and the Middle Ages, spooky and scary stuff, and a few psychological topics as well.” She nodded to Jupiter.

“It turned out that Pinches and I had at least one thing in common. At an opportune moment, Mary photographed the list. That was really good work,” Jupe said.

“Excuse me?” Pete asked.

Mary grinned. “If I keep this up, I’ll be eligible to apply to be an assistant investigator with you guys in twelve years—Seattle branch. You look thirsty. I’ll get you a drink, Pete.”

She ran into the house and the Second Investigator took a breath. “You’ve never praised me, Jupe!” he hissed at his friend.

Decisively Jupiter shook his head. “That’s not true, Pete.”

“Okay, very rarely... maybe once every ten months!”

“Pete, don’t worry, Mary is just helping out. She was interrupting my work, so I had to keep her busy. She’ll be leaving in two days anyway.”

Mary came back with three glasses wedged between her hands. “Tell me what you found out, Pete!” she called out cheerfully.

It was too cheerful for Pete. He shook himself inwardly. "Not much."

"Not much?" Jupiter enquired.

"No. Nothing."

"Too bad."

"Well, I know the name of Mr Pinches's best and probably only friend."

"Oh?" Jupiter remarked.

"Carter Bridou," Pete said, "and I also unmasked the ghost in that abandoned car on Pinches's property."

"You mean the one that gave you a bit of a—"

"—Fright, yes," Pete interrupted. "It's a ghost called Cassius—the neighbour's boy you told me about. He is an imaginative child who likes to roam around other people's property and think up adventures... and by the way, that car in the woods belongs to Pinches! I found that out without Inspector Cotta's help."

"Ah..." Jupe murmured.

"And you might also find the following information interesting, Jupe. A car was indeed stolen in Pinches's neighbourhood. It was parked in front of the driveway of Mrs Baker's house."

Jupiter took a breath. "Excellent work, Pete," he said with a smile. "Excellent!"

Pete then reported in detail what he had seen and heard. Jupiter had a thousand questions about everything and everyone, most of which Pete could not answer.

"I can't squeeze the neighbour like a lemon," he said in his defence.

"—Especially as she might have had something to do with Bob's disappearance and presumably Mr Pinches," Mary said. "After all, she had trouble with him."

Pete shook his head. "I don't think so. She's all right."

"We still don't know where Mr Pinches was actually going," Jupiter picked up the other thread of Mary's interjection. "Even Lesley, whom I reached earlier, had no idea."

"Didn't she say something about San Francisco?"

"Yes, but San Francisco is big."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe Allister Pinches rammed his car up the slope, then he stole Herb's car because he wanted to leave in a hurry, and Bob saw everything and—"

"Slow down," Jupiter said. "The car tracks are from before the rain. Bob was there after that. My first question is—why doesn't Mr Pinches take the main driveway down from his property?"

"Hmm... because he felt he was being watched?" Pete surmised. "—Or being followed? That's why he lost control of the car."

"—Or someone stole Mr Pinches's car," Mary added. "He gave chase, the culprit crashed the car up the slope and then stole the next one... but none of this explains Bob's role."

"No..." Pete pondered, "maybe Bob himself... took the car..."

"You think he was going after someone? Conceivably, Pete," Jupe said, "but what happened next? And why this strange letter to us?"

Pete did not answer because Aunt Mathilda had just came onto the verandah. She was balancing a tray in front of her. "Well, still no sign of Bob? You should finally inform the police!"

"We've already done that," said Jupiter, "but it does nothing... or almost nothing because of the stupid letter... and on a private property, you can also drive cars into the bushes without the police intervening."

"Fortunately, the authorities don't have to be interested in everything," said Aunt Mathilda, "even if it may be unfavourable in this case. At least with you, heads are spinning!"

She placed the tray on the table. "Then, to refresh and fortify the lady and the two gentlemen, here are soda, cake and an extra portion of whipped cream!"

"That's just what we need!" Mary and the boys looked gratefully at Aunt Mathilda.

When Mathilda Jones had gone back into the house, Pete said while chewing: "Oh, I forgot one thing—Mrs Baker told me something pretty strange. Pinches once put someone in prison. I'm afraid she didn't know the details."

Jupiter almost choked. "And you're just saying that now?"

"What would you have done if you had known earlier?"

"I have to call Cotta now!" Jupiter wiped his mouth. "Stay here. Be right back!"

"Phew!" Pete gasped when Jupiter had gone off.

"You must understand him," Mary said. "Jupiter has been trying all this time to find out something about Mr Pinches... but despite all the work, nothing much has come out of it."

"Tell me, Mary, are you moving into our headquarters any time soon?" asked Pete, annoyed.

Mary laughed and shook her head. "Don't worry! Headquarters is off-limits to me... and I was just kidding about the Seattle branch of The Three Investigators. Satisfied? I just want to help find Bob."

Pete nodded. "I'm just saying..."

"What's Kelly doing, by the way? She's still your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Yes," Pete poked at the cake with his fork. "She's on some kind of beach and yoga weekend or something right now."

"And that's why you now have time for your investigations?"

"Sure."

"Aha!" Mary remarked. "Twisted world between Jupiter and you."

"What do you mean?"

Just then Jupiter came back. His satisfied expression was already visible from a distance, but it was also mixed with concern.

"You can still rely on the police," he said when he had sat down with them again.

"Although he's off this weekend, Inspector Cotta has already checked on Allister Pinches, and it's true—Pinches has put someone behind bars, namely a thief of historical works of art. It happened near San Francisco, where Pinches once lived. He caught the thief in the act and the culprit went to prison. There was also a secondary witness, a certain Jack Fisher."

"Exciting!" Pete said, but added: "The old story may or may not have something to do with our case."

"We will consider all possibilities," Jupiter said, "including this theft case."

"When will the convicted offender be released?" Mary wanted to know.

Jupiter turned to her. "A very valid question. That's what Cotta is trying to find out right now. There is another piece of news. A white Toyota has been discovered with the key still in it—out in the industrial estate!"

"That's Herb's car!" asked Pete. "Is the car still there?"

"Cotta said that his officers have just found it," Jupe said. "It should still be there until they contact the owner or have it towed away."

"Then let's go there now and check it out!" Pete exclaimed.

Jupiter nodded. "Bring the fingerprint powder, just to be on the safe side. Mary, if you want, I have another task for you."

"I guess I'll stay here then? What can I do?"

"Can you please find out more about the art theft in San Francisco?" Jupiter gave the date.

“Good one, Jupiter,” Mary said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You can use my aunt’s computer,” Jupe suggested.

“What about the telephone?” Mary asked. “If you talk to people directly, you usually get a lot more out of it.”

Pete grinned.

Jupiter frowned. “Okay, and if you’re done with the art theft, any information you can find about Carter Bridou could be helpful.”

11. Trouble with the Police

Mary quickly went into the Jones house to use the computer and telephone. Jupiter looked at her leaving. It was only a matter of time before there would be a conflict with Aunt Mathilda, who liked to call friends at this hour.

The two investigators packed their equipment and got on their bikes. It was more inconspicuous than with the camper van.

The sun was burning, but a light breeze was blowing in from the Pacific. Even in the Rocky Beach industrial estate, the promising smell of the sea was in the air and that made Pete think longingly of surfing for a moment.

The two boys cycled through the streets until they reached the empty warehouse where the Toyota had been spotted. No one had been interested in this site for years and it looked correspondingly neglected.

Even from a distance, they saw the white car parked on the road. Its rear window flashed in the bright sunlight, but the parking position was much more conspicuous—the car was parked transversely, so that the rear end protruded into the oncoming lane. A few metres away, two motorbikes belonging to a police patrol were parked. One officer had positioned himself with his back to the car and was staring at the concrete skeleton of the warehouse. The other was not to be seen.

Jupiter reached the scene and slowed down. “Strange parking position for a car, officer!”

The policeman turned around. “Indeed, but what is this of concern to you?”

“It seems to me that the driver intended the car to be found quickly. There’s not much going on here, so you have to be a bit more conspicuous—”

“You seem like a particularly smart one!”

“We know of this stolen car and Inspector Cotta told us that it is here,” The First Investigator said. “I am Jupiter Jones, and my friend Pete Crenshaw here is the one that knows of this stolen car.”

“The owner has already been notified... and his name is not Crenshaw.”

“Herb,” Pete said as coolly as possible. He had approached the car and glanced at the interior. “The ignition key is in it. Clearly, this is his car.”

“I can manage quite well on my own,” said the policeman. “Go on your way, boys.”

“Inspector Cotta has allowed us to do some investigation,” Jupiter explained. It was a small lie, but Jupiter knew that the inspector wouldn’t mind—at least not when they would have explained their motives to him at some point. “It is a matter of identifying fingerprints and we have appropriate equipment with us.”

Rather than responding to Jupiter, the policeman spoke briefly into his radio: “Hey, JJ, come back out here!”

A little later, the second policeman swung himself out of a shattered window of the warehouse. Apparently he had been looking around there a bit.

“Trouble?” The second policeman called across the withered lawn.

“Turn around, against the car, hands over your head, legs apart!” the officer ordered Jupiter and Pete.

“But we—” Jupe protested.

The policeman grabbed his service weapon. Jupiter and Pete had to obey.

Now the second policeman was also with them.

Jupiter felt hot under his collar. If the police found Pete's lock pick set, their investigations would be over until they had explained everything.

"You are welcome to call Inspector Cotta," Jupe suggested. "He knows us and will confirm everything for you."

"We can always take care of that later," the policeman said.

While one officer held a gun at the ready, the other patted Jupiter down. When he had finished, he turned to Pete. Jupiter held his breath.

Sides... arms... legs...

"What do we have here?" the officer asked, grasping an object in Pete's pocket from the outside. "Take it out carefully... but very slowly!"

Pete reached in and unearthed a box.

The policeman took it from him, opened it and sniffed at it. "What's this?"

"Fingerprint powder!" Pete replied. "We have already said that."

"Fingerprint powder?" the policeman repeated contemptuously and folded the box shut again. "This is no place to play your detective games. Now get out of here, and make it snappy!"

Jupiter and Pete didn't need to be told twice. They got on their bikes, and without another word, they cycled away. Only when they were out of sight did they stop in front of a car repair shop. It was closed on Saturdays, so they could talk openly among the used cars lined up.

"That was close," Pete said, unfolding the bicycle stand. "The policeman almost found my lock picks! Luckily they were in my sewn-in secret pocket under my knee. He didn't get that far."

"That would indeed have set our investigation back by hours," Jupiter looked dejected. "Even so, we were not very successful."

"We'll have to come up with something else," Pete noticed movement and looked up.

A vagrant was sauntering towards them. Distantly, he reminded Pete and Jupiter of Rubbish-George, a well-known vagrant in Rocky Beach and one who had helped The Three Investigators on several cases—usually for money.

It was soon clear that the man had targeted the boys. After all, they were the only potential 'victims' far and wide. He stopped in front of them and grabbed his dirty baseball cap in greeting. "You guys got anything for me? Need money to eat." He looked at them challengingly.

But instead of responding to him, Pete and Jupe stared spellbound at his jacket. It was a little torn at the sleeve.

"That's Bob's jacket!" Pete shouted and reached out towards the man.

"What are you doing?" The tramp clasped his hands around his upper arms. "This is mine!" he shouted energetically. "You're not getting it!"

"Since when have you had them?" exclaimed Jupiter.

"Always have!"

"It's our friend's jacket," Pete said. "Bob. He's gone missing. You absolutely have to tell us where you got it!"

"I don't have to say anything!" The man backed away a little and made an effort to run away.

But Jupiter had seen through the game. "Okay... how much does the information cost us?"

“A tenner!”

Pete was about to pull out his wallet, but Jupiter held his friend back. If they entered the game too quickly, it would be expensive... and they didn't have that much money with them.

“Three,” Jupiter said coolly.

The tramp shook his head. “Nah, nah, nah... that's not how it works.”

“That's the business of the day, isn't it!” exclaimed Jupiter, bowing his head.

“Ten—and I get to keep the jacket!” the tramp barked.

Jupiter rolled his eyes and stared at the sky.

“Nothing's coming from up there,” said the man. “I've already tried.”

“Okay, pay attention,” Jupiter said. “Three—and you get to keep the jacket after we search the pockets first.”

“There was nothing in it,” the guy said.

“Three dollars is a really good deal for stealing the jacket, isn't it?” added Jupiter.

“Steal? I found it!” the tramp shouted indignantly.

“The fact that we believe you already costs you five of the ten dollars demanded,” Jupiter stated.

“Well, that leaves five for me,” the man argued.

“Maybe,” Jupiter said. “First you tell us!”

“Paying comes before telling,” said the tramp. “That's how it is with me.”

Jupiter pulled out the money, and handed the tramp three dollars.

“What do you want to know?” the man asked.

“Where did you find that jacket?” urged Pete.

“Yes, yes, all right. It was in a car... in an unlocked car.”

Pete sucked in the air.

“In a white Toyota?” Jupiter asked.

He looked at the money in his hand. “Why do you ask when you already know everything?”

“When was that?”

“Last night, maybe?”

“When exactly?”

The tramp squirmed. “I don't know... It was dark. I got a nice place to sleep over in the empty warehouse—right next to a bin. Car comes, man jumps out and takes off. So, Fred Flintstone, I say to myself, being a good citizen, you go check it out.”

“Fred Flintstone?” Jupe remarked, suppressing a giggle. “Anyway, you said a man came out? Not a boy around our age?”

“That's how accurate I could see...” Fred Flintstone grinned.

“Does it cost extra again?” asked Jupiter.

The man nodded.

The First Investigator gave him another dollar.

“Well... as old as you could be, but maybe older... It was too far away... and dark, despite the street lamp there. In any case, the fellow was very agile, almost cat-like. He disappeared in seconds. That's all I know.” He tapped on the jacket. “There really wasn't anything in it. Take a look for yourself... but I'll get to keep it, okay?”

Jupiter nodded. “What I promise, I keep.”

“I've heard that many times...” But the man took off the garment and handed it to Jupiter.

Carefully, Jupiter checked the pockets and jacket. “There's a button missing,” he said thoughtfully, “but on the cuff of the sleeve on the side that isn't torn. Strange. Did you

happen to remove the button, Fred?”

“I take good care of my clothes,” the tramp explained, almost a little offended.

“Okay,” Jupiter murmured to Pete. “If this jacket is Bob’s, he will be okay with it, given the circumstances. Most importantly, this could give us a lead.”

As promised, Jupiter returned the jacket to the tramp, and added: “Where can we find you if we have any more questions?”

“In the evening at the warehouse,” Fred replied, saluted and made off with a smile.

Pete and Jupiter looked at the tramp leaving.

“Without him, we wouldn’t have been able to find the jacket,” Juve said. “The torn sleeve—there’s no doubt about it!”

“So Bob was in the Toyota after all,” Pete pondered. “The car went by your house, left the letter in front of the door, and then was abandoned here.”

Jupiter flipped up the bicycle stand. “Maybe the jacket is a sign to us to stay on this track. That’s why he parked the car so conspicuously. I believe the car and the jacket were meant to be spotted right away.”

“So we have to go back and search the area around the car,” Pete said, “and the warehouse. Also, we can ask Inspector Cotta to check the car for Bob’s fingerprints. Maybe his men will find the button that was torn off too.”

“There is also the possibility that Bob was not at the wheel,” Jupiter pondered and cast a thoughtful glance into the distance. “Anyway, Fred’s observation was not too precise.”

They got on their bikes.

“Warehouse? Salvage yard?” asked Pete. “Anyway, I have to go to the toilet.”

Jupiter hesitated. “—Or inspect the car in the forest again,” he said. “I don’t think Mary has found out that much yet. After all, it’s the weekend. There are lots of people out and about. We might as well take the opportunity to feed the cats.”

“Did you manage to contact Bob’s parents?”

Jupiter nodded. “They’re thinking of coming back.”

At that very moment, his mobile phone buzzed.

12. A Surprising Message

Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone. “A message from Inspector Cotta,” he said, looking at Pete in surprise before reading the message.

“What?” the First Investigator exclaimed. “The guy Pinches put in prison years ago was released two days ago! It was an early release. His name is Pedro Sanchez.”

“Two days ago? That can’t be a coincidence!” cried Pete. He felt his back tingle. A thousand new thoughts flashed through his mind.

“Okay, back to Headquarters then,” said Jupiter, who felt the same way. “We have to check on something. The cats will have to wait!”

“Nothing is happening, simply nothing,” Bob thought to himself. “Sometimes this prison warden is here, and then he’s gone again. I hope Jupiter and Pete have understood my hint with ‘Sue’. I’m sure they did... unless they’ve already gone surfing? If so, Mary would definitely have raised the alarm.

“I know you’ll do anything for me... but it won’t be easy to find me. What kind of clues have you come across so far? Probably the car in the woods? Maybe there are footprints of mine? The key this prison warden took from me is probably back in its place. How are you supposed to draw the right conclusions from all these things? And he also took my jacket. Is he trying to throw you off the scent—away from this prison where I’m trapped? I’m sure of it.

“Jupe and Pete, my money’s on you! The two of us who are trapped here are betting on you. If only I could give you another clue... but I’m locked in here with no contact with the outside. It’s dark as well.

“There’s still one last chance—the cat!”

As Pete and Jupiter turned into the salvage yard, Aunt Mathilda stood on the verandah of the yard office and raised her arms to the sky in despair. “What on earth have you asked Mary to do? The phone’s been jammed for hours!”

Jupiter put the bike down. “But Aunt Mathilda, you also have a mobile phone”.

“Yes, but you know very well how much I don’t like to use it for long conversations, Jupe. Think of the radiation!”

Lured by the words, Uncle Titus peered out from behind a pile of tyres. “Good that you’re back!” He pointed at the tyres. “They all have to go in the corner back there. I’m expecting a load of wooden pallets to sell to a haulage company.”

“With luck, you might be able to sell any of them!” cried Aunt Mathilda. “So far, that’s just a vague hope of yours. I bet they’ll still be here at Christmas.”

“We don’t have time anyway,” Jupiter said and went up to his aunt on the verandah. “Bob is still missing. We are very worried that he has accidentally fallen into an untoward story.”

“And what did the police say?” Aunt Mathilda asked.

“They are just obstructing our work,” Pete replied. “When I just wanted to take some fingerprints, some officer almost arrested me!”

Aunt Mathilda put her hands on her hips. “Serves you right. You should leave the police alone and not keep interfering,” she sighed and continued a little more conciliatory: “Well, it’s about Bob. I understand you, of course. I’m sure everything will work out—just like always.”

Jupiter looked up in surprise. Did she suddenly find investigation work harmless? She was not her usual self, he thought, but he stifled himself from replying. It was better if Aunt Mathilda was relaxed and didn’t drive them crazy with her anxiety.

His aunt was already elsewhere with her thoughts. “Do you want something to eat? I could have—”

“Later,” Jupiter said with a heavy heart. “First we have to talk to Mary.”

When the two investigators entered the Jones house, Bob’s cousin was sitting on a chair in the hallway, the telephone handset wedged between her shoulder and head, making notes on a large pad. She excitedly signalled that Jupiter and Pete should not disturb her.

Curious, Jupiter stopped and Pete also decided not to go to the toilet yet. Every now and then. Mary said ‘Ah’ or ‘Oh, really?’ or ‘When was that?’ or ‘Why?’

Finally she ended the call. “I can’t talk on the phone with someone on my back!” she hissed at the two boys.

“Excuse me, Mary,” Jupiter said. “Your information could be very important. Let’s go somewhere quieter.”

But Aunt Mathilda stood in their way with a load of cherry pie.

Jupiter groaned. “That’s really sweet of you, Aunt Mathilda, but I can’t eat right now!”

“I’ve never heard you say that before, especially when there’s cherry pie.”

“We... uh... Bob...” Jupiter began and then said: “I’m afraid we really have to go to the camper van.”

Under the disappointed gaze of Aunt Mathilda, the three of them went outside back to the salvage yard.

The camper van that Jupiter and Pete had wanted to take to the beach was still parked where Pete had left it that evening. They unlocked it and climbed inside.

“Sort of a secondary headquarters,” Mary said, grinning as she took the bench seat. “—At least one that I can be allowed in...”

Jupiter ignored the remark and looked at Mary promptly.

“Okay!” The girl put her pad down and began: “I have some friends in San Francisco. You could call it a ‘multi-complex communication system’, Jupiter. One is dating a journalist there, well not really dating, but... never mind. He, in turn, was able to give me the name of a colleague who was covering the court case at that time...”

“So about Mr Pinches and the guy he put in prison... The trial had attracted attention because the stolen statue was valuable and the case was a bit of a mystery. To this day, the stolen item has not been recovered. Well, I just spoke to this colleague on the phone! He remembers everything very well because it was his first big job as a journalist.”

“We are curious,” said Jupiter.

“Okay, where should I start?” Mary’s gaze flew over the notes. “So it is about this statue,” she said. “I think it was from ancient Greece—something to do with the underworld. It’s a... Danaid statue—whatever that is. You know anything about it?”

Jupiter nodded. “The Danaids were the daughters of Danaus in Greek mythology. There were fifty of them—all but one killed their husbands on their wedding night.”

Mary faltered briefly. “Anyway, it was on loan from another museum. When it was stolen, Allister Pinches was in the museum—unauthorized actually, as the museum had already closed. He claimed he didn’t know. In any case, he met a man there whom he later identified as Pedro Sanchez. He was carrying an object wrapped in cloth. Sanchez was a petty criminal for whom the theft at the museum was actually out of his league. However, a restaurant owner had also seen Sanchez near the museum.”

“That was Jack Fisher,” Jupiter said. “Cotta told me the name.”

Mary nodded. “His observation supported Mr Pinches’s version. Based on the testimony of Mr Pinches and Mr Fisher, Sanchez was then found guilty, although he vehemently denied the crime. Accordingly, he did not comment on how the crime occurred. My informant said...” She raised her head. “Informant, how does that sound... really professional, right? Well, he said that at that time, Pedro Sanchez’s family had expressed suspicions that—”

“—That Pinches framed Sanchez and could be the culprit himself,” Jupiter interrupted.

Mary looked at him, impressed. “You really are a deduction monster!”

“Only occasionally,” Jupiter said and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

“Anyway,” Mary continued, “here’s what happened after the theft... The alarm was raised at the museum. Mr Pinches waited until the police arrived, was searched by them and he did not have the statue with him. One of the surveillance cameras also showed a second person, of whom, nothing more than a shadow was visible. So Mr Pinches was out of the picture.”

“Was there any information about the escape of the second person, this Sanchez? At least rumours?” Pete wanted to know.

Mary looked at him. “I’m coming to that... There were no concrete details or rumours, just a small incidental matter. A window in the museum that goes out the back was not locked. The supervisor who has to check everything when the museum closes claimed that he had locked it. In the end, however, the court did not attach much importance to the window.”

“Why not?” asked Jupiter.

“Directly below the window, there is a thirty-metre vertical drop down a jagged rock face, and at the end of it is not a road, but the roaring sea!”

“—That you could jump into,” Pete said.

Mary shook her head. “Nope... no one can survive that. It’s not even two metres deep at that point. Of course they searched the seabed for the statue, but to no avail.” She raised her head. That was all the information she had, but that was quite a lot.

“Thank you,” Jupiter said accordingly. “Really good work! We have some things to think about.”

“Can you pass me the pad, please?” Pete had grabbed a pen. “I need a little overview.” Mary handed him the pad.

Carefully, the Second Investigator separated Mary’s notes so that he had a white sheet in front of him. “I’ll write down all the possibilities now,” Pete said. “Then we can discuss each one of them.”

Jupiter gave him a puzzled look.

13. Back to the Demon's Lair

Pete scribbled a few notes on the pad and thought. "Number one—Pedro Sanchez was released from prison. Now he's taking revenge on Pinches, who he blames for his time in prison, and somehow Bob got in the way."

"Number two..." Jupiter continued, "Pinches was the thief then, however he may have done it. Then Sanchez is innocent and has all the more reason to take revenge on Pinches for putting him in prison."

"You mean Allister Pinches has the statue?" asked Pete, noting it on the pad, "and Sanchez sat innocently in prison for years for it?"

Mary nodded. "It's possible. Pinches heard that Sanchez had been released. It came as a surprise to him, so he had to flee immediately. That's why he asked Lesley to look after the cats at short notice."

"—Or..." Jupiter pondered, "Sanchez was already lying in wait for Pinches, in a car on the driveway. That's why Pinches fled along the forest path. In his panic, he drove against the slope."

"—And then Sanchez got hold of Pinches..." whispered Mary.

Jupiter swallowed. "Actually, all this must have happened before Bob arrived... at least that's what the tracks in the forest say." He pinched his lower lip. "If I don't calmly think over all the information in context," he added, "we won't get anywhere."

"It would help if we have new circumstantial evidences," Pete added, regretting it at the same moment.

Jupiter nodded immediately. "Good idea. Let's pay another visit to Allister Pinches's house because now we know what to look for—clues to the theft at the museum; clues about Pedro Sanchez; and clues to the missing statue."

"The Danaid statue!" Mary added.

"I'm glad you brought that up again," Pete said wryly. "Agreed, but first I have to go to the toilet. I'm about to burst. Be right back!" He grabbed his mobile phone, got out of the camper van and closed the door behind him.

Jupiter looked over at Pete's notes again.

Mary reclined on the narrow bench. "Can you ever be romantic, Jupiter?" she asked, "for example, when you're not working on a case?"

Jupiter put the pad aside and took a breath. "I... I don't think it's programmed into me."

"I know—always one hundred percent logical and a head person through and through." A smile flashed across her face. "—And that's because—"

Jupiter sat bolt upright. "Because what?"

"Because... you are insecure!" Mary exclaimed. "It's all a scaffolding for you to hold on to."

"Ha!" Jupiter laughed out loud. "That's just a tit-for-tat retaliation to what I said to you earlier, isn't it? I am the exact opposite of being insecure!"

"I would doubt that!"

"You're welcome to ask Bob and Pete about that!"

“They would agree with you, I’m sure, and a thousand other people, but you have to look behind things. There’s something dormant in you. Maybe ‘insecure’ isn’t the right word. Maybe you’re repressing something that’s close to you...”

“That’s rubbish!” Jupiter wanted to say, but then found himself at a loss for words when the death of his parents flashed through his mind.

“Okay, let’s talk about something else,” Mary said. “This is a bad time. Why is Pete taking so long?”

Jupiter pondered for a while. “Maybe you can say more important things with thirty percent than with a hundred,” he then said.

Mary said: “I’ll make you a deal—from now on, I’ll only talk thirty percent—”

“Proposal accepted!” replied Jupiter.

“I haven’t finished... and you, in return, have to be less rational and logical.” She blinked at him. “—And only thirty percent infallible.”

“I will analyze your proposal for possible advantages and disadvantages,” Jupiter said in all seriousness.

She looked at him and had to stifle a laugh.

The First Investigator cleared his throat artificially. “I can’t think when you look at me like that!”

“There’s nothing to think about,” Mary countered.

“On the contrary... I have to consider whether your proposal is really balanced.”

“It is... and it’s one hundred percent fair,” Mary said. “It’s a win-win situation, so to speak—there are only winners!”

“All right... agreed!” Jupiter said and he grinned. “—But you have to promise me one thing!”

“What?”

“As long as we’re looking for Bob, my part of the bargain doesn’t apply yet.”

“That makes sense,” Mary said.

Jupiter bent over the sheet again.

“I suppose I shouldn’t and won’t go to the underworld mansion with you,” Mary said. “Instead, I’ll check on Carter Bridou—the one who usually feeds the cats.”

“That’ll be good,” Jupe said.

At that moment, Pete came back. “Why did you bring your mobile phone to the toilet?” Jupiter asked him.

“So that I don’t miss a thing.” Pete closed the door with a grin. “Well, everyone has their secrets. Are we going with the camper van?”

“Better with the bicycles,” Jupiter replied. “Officially, we’re going to feed the cats... but unofficially we are on a secret mission!”

Once again, Jupiter and Pete rode to Allister Pinches’s underworld mansion. At the gate, Pete now paid no attention to the stone hound from hell.

Briskly, the investigators pushed open the entrance gate and cycled to the house. Along the way, they could see the dark paintwork of the crashed car shimmering through the leaves. However, they preferred to deal with that later.

The two boys dismounted and pushed the bikes to the side of the house so that they could not be seen immediately. Then Jupiter ran to the pole with the skull and crossbones to grab the key for the front door...

... But he reached into a void.

"It's gone," he whispered to Pete. "The key's not here. Is there anyone in the house?"

"You mean Bob?" asked Pete hopefully.

"I mean anyone. I don't expect it to be Bob, to be honest."

Pete and Jupiter took a few steps back. The windows still looked dark. Now they saw why—thin black fabric curtains hung behind each window pane. They hadn't noticed that in the past evening.

"I think a curtain just moved!" whispered Pete.

"Where?"

"Upstairs."

Jupiter looked. "Pete, are you sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, under such circumstances, I might be imagining things," Pete said. "What do we do now?"

"We'll try to get into the house as planned," Jupe decided. "If the door is unlocked, then someone might be in there."

"What if it is locked?" Pete asked.

"Then we need your magic touch, Pete!"

Pete shook his head. "You want me to break in there?"

"It's about Bob!"

"Maybe that Pedro Sanchez is lurking in the house looking for that statue! I don't want to run into him!"

"There are two of us."

"He might have a gun! There could be five of us and it wouldn't do any good."

"Okay, Pete, how about we go back to Rocky Beach, have some ice cream and watch people sunbathe on the beach?" Jupe said sarcastically.

Pete swallowed. "You're right... but you go first!"

"Of course," said Jupiter.

Cautiously, they walked towards the front door. The boards of the verandah still creaked with each step.

Jupiter tried to open the door. "It's locked" he said. "Maybe there really is no one inside. Go on, do your magic trick."

Pete looked at the lock, flipped up one trouser leg of his jeans and pulled the lock pick set out of his secret pocket. He selected an appropriate tool and poked around in the keyhole. It took a while, but finally it cracked quietly. Pete took a step back to let Jupiter go first.

They crossed the anteroom and came into the large room. Even during the day, it seemed dim. That was probably due to the dark curtains. However, they did not dare to turn on the light.

Everything seemed unchanged, even though an unfamiliar scent hung in the air. Jupiter and Pete paused. It was deadly quiet.

Just as they were about to move on, a short, muffled sound rang out!

14. In Search of Clues

Jupiter immediately switched on his flashlight and shone it in the appropriate direction. Two poison-green eyes stared at him.

"A black cat," muttered the First Investigator, "but that must be the other one. The cat we saw yesterday was a grey tabby with yellowish eyes."

"Like that grey tabby cat there?" whispered Pete, pointing in the direction of the kitchen. "So now, there are two cats... which means that both are back here."

"They must be hungry," said Jupiter. "Let's give them something to eat then."

Determined, he strode towards the kitchen, opened the door, looked at the kitchen table and tried to match the image with what he remembered from the night before.

"Someone was here," the First Investigator said quietly. "The note is in a different position, and the food bowls as well."

"Then we'd better leave," Pete suggested.

"In a minute." Jupiter filled the two bowls with food. "The cats need something to eat." Whispering, he added: "In case we run into someone, we're just here to feed the cats, okay?"

The grey tabby cat came in and meowed. The black one watched Jupiter from a distance.

"But who has been in here?" murmured Pete. "Pedro Sanchez? Mr Pinches himself? Bob? Or Cassius, the neighbour's son? I wouldn't put it past him."

"Whoever it was, he's probably left," Jupiter whispered and put the bowls on the floor. "—Otherwise the cats would behave differently."

"Do you think or do you know?"

"It's a reasonable assumption."

In view of the filled food bowl, the black cat did not hold back any longer and came closer.

Jupiter nodded in the cat's direction. "Look, he's wearing a little collar. He probably gets a little bell put on him when he's allowed out, so he doesn't catch a bird. It's a method that's very controversial, though."

"You are a true pet expert," Pete said. "There's really nothing you don't know about."

"—Or it's just a decorative collar," Jupiter said. Quietly he added: "Anyway, we'll go upstairs now... but be careful!"

"I wanted to leave," Pete muttered, but resigned himself to his fate.

They left the kitchen and put the bowls in the living room for the cats. On the way to the stairs, Jupiter glanced into the toilet again. There was no one there. Carefully, they climbed up one step at a time to the first floor. The creaking noise could not be avoided.

Upstairs, they first looked around. The door to the study was open. That was how they had left the room. But before they could search anything more closely, they had to check all the rooms on the safe side.

The two completely empty rooms were as before. There seemed to be no change in the bedroom and the attached bathroom as well.

Now for the storeroom... Jupiter carefully opened the door. Rays of sunlight fell through a skylight, bathing some boxes, books and picture frames in warm light. To the side stood a large cupboard, most of the varnish had peeled off. With a little tug, Pete pulled the door

open. A mountain of old shirts fell towards him. He quickly pushed the door shut again. Only with difficulty could he suppress a fit of coughing.

"No one here," Jupiter said and waved to Pete to go out.

They left the storeroom and entered the study. Here, too, everything seemed deserted. There was hardly any place to hide either. To be on the safe side, the First Investigator bent down and looked under the desk.

Nobody.

"Good," Jupiter said, straightening up again, "then let's get to work."

The first thing Jupiter did was to take a look at the desk top. Everything looked just as they had left it. Bills, postcards and other documents were reasonably well-ordered. Jupiter was a little annoyed that he had not memorized the sight more carefully the night before. A black pen lay carelessly next to the brown cup. Had it been like that on the last visit? Jupiter was not sure. He recalled that the message from Bob had been written with a black pen.

"Will you look through the bookshelves, Pete?" asked Jupiter. "I'll take care of the desk. We're looking for clues about the theft of the Danaid statue, about Pedro Sanchez and anything that might have to do with the court case. This is our hottest lead—maybe a blackmail letter, a threatening letter, whatever."

Pete approached the wall. "On the shelf here is the same book you are reading, Juve!" said Pete in surprise.

"The one about the brain? I know. It was on the invoices Mary got from the bookshop."

"Man! I thought I'd discovered something, and you know everything again!" Pete took the book and flicked through it.

But Jupiter interrupted him immediately. "Can you come here a moment, Pete?"

Pete looked up.

"There's a drawer here," Jupiter said. "It's locked."

"No," Pete said, shaking his head, "not again!"

"Yes. Open it, please!"

With a sigh, Pete put the book aside and stepped next to Jupiter. The First Investigator gestured to the bottom left of the desk. "The second drawer from the top."

Pete bent down. It was a simple lock. Nevertheless, it was another burglary.

"Think of Bob, Pete."

"I don't do anything else," said the Second Investigator.

A short time later, he pulled open the drawer. Inside was only one folder.

Curious, Jupiter took it out and began to leaf through it. "Strange," he said.

"What is it, Juve?"

"It's all to do with the court case!"

Pete wanted to stand up again. But as he moved, his gaze fell deep into the drawer. "There's something else in there," he murmured, "at the very back."

He reached in. "Two mobile phones," he said, and then a surge of excitement welled inside him. "One of them is Bob's!"

"Give me that!" Jupiter threw the folder onto the table top and literally snatched the phone out of Pete's hand. "Indeed! Maybe it contains clues! How did it get here?"

"Either Bob lost it and someone found it," Pete said, "or someone took it off him."

"The PIN," Jupiter said, "how are we going to know Bob's PIN?"

"You'll have to give me the phone for that," Pete said.

"You know his PIN?"

"I saw it once by chance, but it was a while ago. Maybe it's no longer it."

Jupiter pressed the mobile phone into Pete's hand. "And you memorized it?"

“Wasn’t hard. It’s my date of birth backwards.”

“Bob used your date of birth for his PIN?”

“His own would have been too easy, everyone can figure that out right away...”

Concentrating, Pete entered the numbers. “Nope, wrong,” he said disappointedly.

“Take my birthday,” Jupiter said. “Maybe he changed it.”

Pete nodded and tried. “Bingo!”

The mobile phone lit up and Pete stared at the screen. “Bob had been composing a voice message,” he said excitedly. “Maybe we’ll find the solution to everything here!”

Jupiter took the device from him. A second later, he had the message ready to play and touched the icon.

There was a soft rustling. Then Bob’s voice rang out. “I’m standing in front of Mr Pinches’s house... I’m recording a voice message for you, Jupe and Pete, so you can hear the exciting story of me feeding cats.”

It was almost eerie to hear Bob’s voice, and yet so familiar and close. Jupiter and Pete cast uneasy glances at each other while Bob continued talking. So Jupiter and Pete got to hear how Bob had caught his jacket on the branch, discovered the car and then entered the house.

“Watch the order,” Jupiter muttered. “So Bob was first at the car, then in the house. Maybe he’s still here!”

Tensely they listened on.

“He fed the cats. Nothing conspicuous so far. Hardly any background noise either,” Jupiter analyzed, but then his muscles tensed.

“... I reach into the food box and there—” Bob hesitated and his voice became brittle. “There... Jupe, something’s moving! I... I think the devil, yes... the one above the table... with red eyes... it’s staring at me and—”

“What?” cried Pete, pressing his hands together so that his knuckles turned white.

“... It’s glowing and... the devil’s coming off the ceiling! Jupe! Help! What have I got myself into? This cold breath I feel, where did it suddenly come from... The devil is floating towards me, Jupe!”

A choking sound followed.

Pete’s face was white as a sheet. Jupiter did not dare to move. He stared at the mobile phone to see if the recording was over... but it went on for a few more seconds.

Suddenly they heard Bob laughing out loud. “Just kidding, Jupe and Pete... Did I scare you, Pete? Sorry! Every scare has, as Jupe always say, a rational explanation. This one is simple—I made it up to scare you a little! A little entertaining element.” He laughed again. “But now I’m going to make the very un-scary cats happy!”

“Sheesh!” Jupiter gasped, breathing a sigh of relief. “We’ve really been taken in by him.”

That was the end of the recording. Nothing more came.

Disappointed, Jupiter exclaimed: “What a bummer! Whatever happened, it must have caught Bob quite by surprise. Despite the strange surroundings here, he was in a jolly mood. Nothing to indicate a threat or sudden turn of events. Too bad the recording stopped here. Something must have happened, otherwise Bob would have continued the story!”

Jupiter had just finished the sentence when they heard a crack from below.

“The cats?” whispered Pete.

Now it creaked. Now Jupiter raised his head. “That’s coming from outside,” he murmured. “Someone’s on the verandah!”

Gingerly, he pushed the chair backwards and stood up. A creak sounded again. As if in slow motion, Jupiter crept towards the window and peered through the curtains. “You can’t see the entire verandah,” he whispered. “The eaves! It reaches too far forward.”

Now they heard footsteps, slow footsteps, with pauses, as if someone was moving very carefully outside.

“He’s going around the house,” Pete whispered. “He’ll spot our bikes!”

The sound stopped. Shortly afterwards, the footsteps seemed to approach the entrance again.

“Can we get out through the window?” asked Pete.

Jupiter shook his head. “That would be too daring.”

“Oh come on, it’s only the first floor!” Pete went to the window. The wooden floor groaned with every step. He grabbed the window handle and wanted to push the window up, but it did not even move a bit.

“It’s stuck,” hissed the Second Investigator, “it’s stuck, Jupe!”

“I heard you,” Jupiter hissed back.

Downstairs everything was suddenly quiet.

“Maybe he’ll go away, whoever he is,” Pete said.

“Could it be Cassius roaming around here?” asked Jupiter.

Pete shook his head. “The steps sound heavy. Cassius is too light. It must be an adult.”

“Let’s hide.” Jupiter looked around. The study didn’t offer much. At most one person could fit under the desk. Jupiter quickly put the folder back in the drawer and carefully slid it shut. He pocketed Bob’s mobile phone. “The storeroom,” he said.

“We might as well go down quickly and cheerfully announce that we’re just feeding the cats here,” Pete muttered.

“—And had to break in to do it... unfortunately.”

“That’s what you told me to do, Jupe.”

“We have to be realistic, Pete. I hardly think that the person out there is out for a peaceful conversation. If it is Pedro Sanchez, we have a problem. It may also be Mr Pinches who has come back early. If so, why is he skulking around outside his own house like that? If we hide in the storeroom, we can sneak out later and find out what the person is looking for here!”

“Unless... that someone is going right there!”

“That would be unfortunate, admittedly...”

“But not unrealistic!” Pete said. “There are a thousand things in the boxes that could interest someone.”

The footsteps outside had fallen silent again.

Quietly, Jupiter and Pete crept from the study into the hallway. Then they heard a key being pushed into the front door and turned. The lock clicked open. A slight breeze was noticeable.

15. The Intruder

“Who could that be?” asked Pete. “Could it be Mr Pinches?”

“Anyone could have got hold of the key,” Jupiter whispered.

He looked around. They had to decide—storage room or bedroom?

Hastily, Jupiter pushed Pete into the bedroom. There he checked the window. It was secured with a lock—probably like that in the study. His eyes fell on the wardrobe and bed, but then he decided on the attached bathroom.

A moment later, he had opened the door. The bathroom had a narrow window, but no one could fit through it. No matter. He and Pete slipped in. Quietly, Jupiter locked the door from the inside. For now, they were safe.

“If the person wants to look for something, it is highly unlikely to be in the bathroom,” Jupe explained his decision.

But that did little to convince Pete. “I think the guy could have spotted our bikes and heard us. Then he won’t rest until he finds us.”

They listened. Muffled footsteps sounded from the ground floor. They paused.

“The cat food,” Jupiter muttered. “It’s in the middle of the living room.”

“I hope those two have eaten everything,” Pete whispered. “Otherwise he’ll see by now at the latest that someone must be here!”

The person continued walking. Jupiter and Pete heard the kitchen door open and close again. Then another door.

“That must be the downstairs toilet,” Jupiter whispered.

A scraping sound followed.

“Is he moving a piece of furniture?” asked Pete.

Jupiter motioned to him to be quiet. “He’s looking for us,” he murmured. “I’m afraid you were right.”

He looked around for possible weapons... but there was little in the bathroom to use. With a cheap toilet brush, they could hardly provide an element of surprise.

Now they heard the person slowly climbing the stairs—step by step, very slowly. Now he was at the first floor.

There was silence. He obviously sensed the situation.

Jupiter and Pete held their breath. A door creaked.

“The storeroom,” Jupiter whispered.

They heard the footsteps getting quieter and objects being moved back and forth in the room. Then the person came out again into the hallway, but the footsteps moved away. Apparently, the stranger was heading for the study.

“Shall we?” asked Pete.

“Escape?” Jupiter nodded.

Gingerly he turned the lock. It clicked... but then they heard that the stranger coming back to the hallway. Jupiter quickly locked the door once again.

“We have no other choice now,” he whispered and took a breath.

He stood right next to the door, the toilet brush stretched out in front of him like a weapon. Pete chose the shower—one hand on the shower head, the other on the tap. At least

he wanted to provide a little surprise—a cold shower surprise. Maybe they could use the hopefully confusing situation that followed to escape.

The stranger entered the bedroom whose door Jupiter had deliberately left open. He had wanted to give the impression that no one was hiding here. So far that had worked out well.

Now the wardrobe was opened and closed again. A groan suggested that the unknown person was looking under the bed.

Now the footsteps were getting closer. They were trapped! Pete's breath caught in his throat.

The stranger turned the bathroom door knob... he turned it again... and then shook it.

"Come out!" It was the voice of a man—a rather elderly man.

Jupiter and Pete did not react.

"Come out of there or I'll put some bullets through the door!"

"Bummer," Pete whispered. "Is he bluffing?"

"I wouldn't call your bluff," Jupiter hissed back.

"Well, what is it?" the voice intruded. "Shall I let my rifle do the talking?"

"Don't shoot," Jupiter shouted. "We are unarmed!"

"Hands behind your head and come out slowly!"

"Don't shoot!" Pete shouted again.

"Nothing will happen to you if you do what I say."

After a brief exchange of glances with Pete, Jupiter put the toilet brush on the floor and then slowly unlocked the door. Carefully, he pushed the door open a little.

At the other end of the bedroom stood a man. It was not Allister Pinches as Jupiter knew what he looked like from the photo. He had never seen this inconspicuous man who was probably in his fifties, and dressed in casual T-shirt jeans. There was nothing striking about his face—it was a face that could hardly be described. The eye area, however, suggested a fine shrewdness, even if this trait was just eclipsed by caution and suspicion. In his hands, the stranger held a short rifle pointed at Jupiter.

The First Investigator raised his hands and left the bathroom. Pete followed him.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"We are here to feed the cats," Jupiter said calmly.

The man narrowed his eyes to slits. "Do you think I'm stupid? That's what Lesley does. You're nothing but common burglars!"

"We're not," Jupiter said. "You're right, sir, originally Lesley was supposed to look after the cats, but she handed the job over to us. She received an invitation for the weekend, which she was happy to accept, and that's when we—"

"Who are you guys anyway?"

"We are—" Jupiter said and interrupted himself. "My name is Jupiter Jones, and this is Pete Crenshaw. Occasionally we help out with minor tasks, for example, feeding cats in the neighbourhood—as in this case."

"And how did you get in here, huh? The key that was left for Lesley is in my pocket."

Uh-oh! They were caught in a predicament. Thinking quickly but calmly, Jupiter said: "That is correct, sir. The key was not where it was supposed to be. Now it explains why—because you had it. That's why we gained access to the house in a different way."

"In a different way?" the man repeated, shaking his head. "So that's what you call it!" As before, he pointed the rifle at the two boys. "And you expect me to believe that?"

"We couldn't let the cats starve, could we?" cried Pete.

The man looked at him. "Say, I've got a suspicion—did Mrs Baker send you? The annoying neighbour? So you can rummage around a bit?"

"No," said Jupiter. "I don't know any Mrs Baker. We're telling the truth, honest! No one hired us, no one other than Mr Pinches, even if it was indirectly—through Lesley. You found us up here not because we were poking our noses into other people's business, but because we heard strange noises outside and we were afraid so we came up here to hide."

"It's like what Jupiter says," Pete added. "Go ahead and call the police. Please ask for Inspector Cotta. He can confirm that we are harmless boys."

"Inspector huh?" the man said. "A police inspector knows the two of you? Oh, I get it... You must be one of those juvenile delinquents that breaks into houses, aren't you?"

"No, no, no, on the contrary, sir," Jupe quickly said. "We know the inspector because we have helped him a few times to catch... uh... juvenile delinquents."

"Really?" the man asked, seemingly unconvinced, but he lowered his rifle. "Come to think of it, you might be telling the truth since I saw the cat food downstairs..." He thought for a moment. "But I still have one small question—if you are here to feed the cats, you must know where the key for Lesley was kept."

"Outside, in the skull... with crossbones," Jupiter said. "At least it was there last night."

"Well... that's right," The man considered. "That's where it was, and that's where Allister always puts it when it's necessary. You must understand—he obviously left in a hurry. I am very worried about him, especially as I discovered his car a short distance from here. There seems to have been an accident. Do you know anything about it?"

"We saw the car as well," Jupiter said. "By the way, may I ask who you are, sir?"

"Just a friend," was the answer.

"Sir, if you're looking after things here, you must be Carter Bridou," Jupe said.

Surprised, the man raised his eyebrows. "That's right," he said. "How do you know about me?"

"Lesley told us about you," Pete said immediately. He was careful not to mention Mrs Baker since Jupe claimed that he did not know her.

Carter Bridou nodded and pointed to the stairs. "Shall we go downstairs and then you can tell me a little about what you know. You'll have to excuse me, but I really thought you were burglars. That's when I grabbed the rifle from Allister's stash."

"He owns a rifle?" asked Pete.

The man nodded. "He felt he was being followed, and now the situation is more than strange. Allister did contact me briefly this morning—"

"He called you?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

Bridou nodded. "By phone... but he sounded strange. He was supposedly in San Diego."

"Lesley told us he was going to San Francisco, though," Pete said.

"That's the amazing thing. He also mentioned to me a few days ago that he wanted to go north... so it seemed that he changed plans."

They went downstairs and sat down at the table with the devil with the red eyes hovering over it. Bridou got some glasses from the kitchen and a carafe of water. The cats stroked his legs as he did so. They seemed to know and like him.

Jupiter saw that. "Why didn't you look after the cats?" he asked. "Lesley said you usually did when Mr Pinches was away."

"That's right. I love them, the two critters," Mr Bridou replied. "I was out with my yacht the past few days. I have a small yacht, you know. Allister tried to call me a couple of times but couldn't reach me and my voice mail was off." He pulled out his mobile phone. "I can even tell you exactly when that was. Here, look at the call log..." He tapped the phone. "The first one was yesterday in the early afternoon—from his landline here, but the connection didn't come through. Eventually, we spoke... this morning at just before eight when he called

from his mobile phone. He only spoke briefly, mainly that I had nothing to worry about and that the cats were taken care of by Lesley.” He held the phone under Jupiter’s nose for confirmation, who glanced at it. “When I got back to Rocky Beach earlier, I wanted to check on things here right away,” Bridou concluded.

“How long have you known Mr Pinches?” asked Jupiter.

Bridou smiled. “Actually, I was expecting from you some clues about my friend’s disappearance... but instead, you’re bombarding me with questions. You’re welcome, though. I’ve been close friends with Allister for a number of years. In fact, I think I can say that I’m his only real friend. I’m an art dealer. That’s how we met and also how we hit it off right away.” He pointed to the room with his hand. “As you can see, Allister is a great collector.”

Jupiter nodded even though one could argue about his taste.

The cats stroked Bridou’s legs and meowed.

“Are you hungry again?” asked Bridou in a soft voice. “What a question! Hades and Kore are simply difficult to satisfy.”

Jupiter probed further: “If Mr Pinches and you know each other so well, he must have told you about the trial he once testified in years ago.”

“You know about that?” Bridou looked up. “For cat-sitters, you are well-informed!”

“Lesley told us.” Jupiter lied, as the information came from Mrs Baker and Inspector Cotta.

“Of course he told me about the trial—several times, in fact. All this happened a while before I knew him. He didn’t tell me all the details but I have the impression that it burdens him to have sent someone to prison.”

“That’s why he has those books about how the brain works,” Jupiter said. “Did he possibly doubt his own testimony? Did he perhaps accuse the wrong person who now wants revenge?” Jupiter kept a close look at the man.

Carter Bridou looked perplexed. “I must say, you feed cats and now this... If you saw the books, then you were in his study after all?”

“Uh... I happen to see them when we were deciding where to hide,” Jupe explained.

“Well... but if you were right, that would be terrible!” Bridou reflected. “Allister never gave the impression that he feared he was somehow mistaken. All I know of the incident at the time is that he was in a museum late at night—I think just before or just after closing time. There he caught an art thief red-handed, who was then arrested by the police. How come you are so interested in this?”

“Something must have happened yesterday... with his car.”

“So you think there’s a connection?” Bridou murmured.

Jupiter nodded. “Pedro Sanchez, who was sent to prison by Mr Pinches’s testimony, was recently released.”

“Oh?” Bridou scratched himself. He looked surprised. “This is news indeed! He is free again? And now you think he is in for revenge? ... Possibly...” He paused.

Outside, the wood of the verandah creaked. Involuntarily Bridou reached for the rifle he had placed on a chair beside him.

16. The Noose Tightens

Cautiously, Carter Bridou crept up to the window. With the tip of the rifle, he pushed the curtain aside just enough to see outside.

Jupiter and Pete had followed him and were also peering through the gap. At first, they noticed nothing unusual. The forecourt lay quietly in the sun. Then Pete noticed a movement at the nearby edge of the forest.

"That's Cassius," Bridou snapped. "Cassius Baker! That nosy little fellow! What's he doing here?" The man turned and said: "Apparently he thinks Allister's property is his adventure playground, and it's not the first time that's happened."

"He's going in the direction of the car," Jupiter said.

Bridou let go of the curtain. "Wait, I'll go give him a piece of my mind!" He went to the entrance hall.

Pete wanted to follow him, but Jupiter held him back. "We'd better stay here," he said.

Bridou just nodded and hurried outside.

"What are you doing?" asked Pete. "Why don't we go with him? Don't you want to get more out of Bridou?"

Jupiter pointed to the stairs. "When we were upstairs earlier, we found the folder in which Pinches had collected all sorts of things about the trial. Apparently he's been studying it a lot lately. I'd like to take a second look."

"Are you crazy? Bridou won't be gone for long!"

"If need be, I'll just take the folder with me. You stay downstairs and warn me when he comes back."

Pete wanted to object, but Jupiter was already on his way to the stairs. So the Second Investigator took a look outside. In the meantime, Bridou had gone into the forest. Pete felt a caress on his legs and looked down. It was the black cat!

The Second Investigator bent down and stroked Hades. The cat allowed him and began to purr. Gently, Pete continued to cuddle him, first on the back of his head, then along the collar, until he suddenly felt something.

"What have you got here?" the Second Investigator murmured and tried to pull up part of the collar. The cat became unwilling and stiffened, but Pete did not let go of the collar. What was hanging from it was small and round, something like... now the object came to light—a button!

"Jupe! Jupe!" he called out.

"Is he coming back?" came from above.

Pete looked out of the window for a moment. "No, but..." His fingertips slid over the object which was tied to the collar with a piece of string. "I found a button... I think it's from Bob's jacket!" He heard a chair being pushed back upstairs and called out: "Come down, Jupe! Help me remove the cat's collar!"

The cat had now had enough and wanted to free himself.

"I can't get the collar off!" Pete yelled.

Hades hissed and extended his claws.

"Hurry up, Jupe! Ow! Ouch!"

A good blow from the cat followed. Pete's wrist was bleeding, but he continued to hold the collar. Jupe rushed down the stairs and looked as if he wanted to attack the cat. The cat seemed to think so too, at least he was scratching wildly.

"Here!" shouted Pete, holding the collar with his hands so that Jupiter could see it. "Help me take this off! Go on! Ow!" Again Hades scratched Pete.

With Pete restraining the cat, Jupe finally removed the collar.

"Yes!" Jupiter shouted. Between his fingers, he held the collar with the button!

Hades jerked away. Pete immediately licked the blood from the wounds.

Jupiter took a close look at the button and the string. "The button must be from Bob's jacket," he muttered. "It's the same brand. That's no coincidence! The piece of string—it could very well come from a piece of clothing."

"Sure! We were still wondering why a button was missing from the undamaged sleeve, of all things."

"Pete! Do you know what this means? Bob must be close by! Remember—the first time we came to this house, there was only one cat. We thought the other one had run away, but it didn't."

"The cat was with Bob," Pete said. "He tied this button on the collar with the string and now the cat's back here!"

"Bob!" Jupiter wanted to jump up to search everything again, but Pete held him back.

"Jupe, wait!" Pete looked at the string that was attached to the button. "There are several knots in this string. Why are there three of them? Actually you only need one."

Again he licked his bleeding wrist, but with the excitement, he felt no pain. He looked very closely at the string. "These are sailor's knots," Pete continued, casting an inspecting glance outside. There was still no sign of Bridou. "You know them, Jupe! And Bob knows them too—from our boat trips. Here, this is a bowline. He used it to attach the button onto the collar. Then with the remaining string dangling here, there are two more knots, when you don't really need any more."

Jupiter took the collar in his hand. "Yes, yes, of course... Bob has already revealed himself to us through the button. Then there are the two additional knots... I can see a clove hitch, followed by another bowline—both completely useless. You're right, Pete. Presumably the knots are a sign as well. They stand for something. If Bob tied them, they're a message to us!"

"He used the first bowline to tie the button onto the collar," Pete thought out aloud. "If the button represents Bob, then Bob and bowline could mean... there's a noose around his neck?"

"It is clear that he is in a dangerous situation," Jupe said, "but what is he trying to tell us with the two other knots?"

Pete looked outside again. Now Bridou was standing with Cassius at the edge of the forest, engrossed in a heated conversation.

"These two knots—clove hitch and bowline... hmm..." Jupiter said thoughtfully. Then he looked at Pete. "The knots represent initials! A 'C' and a 'B'! 'C' for Carter and 'B' for Bridou!"

For a moment, there was silence.

"Carter Bridou?" said Pete, startled. "But why him? He wasn't here yesterday, was he?"

"That's what he claims," Jupiter said. "One could of course assume—"

"—Or Sanchez is pretending to be Bridou?" Pete interrupted. "That could also be the case! We don't know what he looks like, and now he has Bob in his power... but why?"

“Because Bob got in the way of his captor,” Jupe suspected. “We might be able to check how Bridou looks like if we can find a photo of him in the records of Allister Pinches—but that might take longer. First we’ll look for Bob.”

“Bridou is still standing there talking to Cassius,” Pete said. “That gives us some time!”

“Let’s go then!” Jupiter shouted and pressed the collar into Pete’s hand. “I don’t think we’ve seen all of this house yet. There must be a secret place, maybe something like a hidden cellar!”

“But where is the entrance?” asked Pete.

“The entrance... the entrance...” Jupiter looked around. “Cerberus! The three-headed dog. Why didn’t I think of that! The hound guards the entrance to the underworld!”

“Jupe!” cried Pete. “Bridou is coming back!”

Immediately Jupiter and Pete sat down at the table again and acted as if nothing significant had happened. Pete stuffed the cat’s collar into his trouser pocket. Shortly, Bridou was back in the room.

He hesitated for a moment. “Is... something wrong?”

“No,” Jupiter said as lightly as possible, “except that Pete tried to pet the cat and got a few scratches in the process.”

“I see... Hades?”

Pete nodded.

“He can easily get irritated,” Bridou said.

The man closed the living room door and slowly approached. He didn’t seem to have shed his mistrust yet. In any case, he kept the rifle in his hand.

“That was a long conversation with Cassius,” Jupiter said.

“I questioned him a little,” Bridou said, “whether he noticed anything with Allister... last night.”

“Well?” Jupe asked.

“Not much.”

“Too bad.”

Bridou sat down. “Hades?” he said, making a beckoning noise.

After a few seconds, the cat did indeed creep up—without the collar around his neck.

“Here...” Jupiter said quickly and ran his hand along the table in a confused way to distract the man. “I guess there’s not much left for us to do here.”

Bridou’s gaze went up again. “Yes, I suppose so,” he said slowly.

“Then we should actually go,” Pete said as calmly as he could.

“Yes,” Bridou said.

“You’ve got everything under control here now,” the Second Investigator said and wanted to get up.

“Hold on, Pete...” Bridou paused. “It seems you were with the neighbour Mrs Baker yesterday.”

Pete had not expected that. “I... I...”

“Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“Earlier you pretended you didn’t know her,” Bridou burst out. “I don’t like being lied to!”

“But sir! It was I who said I didn’t know Mrs Baker,” Jupiter intervened, “and that is correct. I don’t know her at all, and Pete just didn’t mention his visit there.”

“You are not putting all your cards on the table.”

“Can we go now?” Jupe asked.

“Take it easy. First I would very much like Hades’s collar back,” Bridou said.

“His collar?” Jupe pretended to be surprised.

“Isn’t that on him?” stuttered Pete. “Or did it drop off and got lost somehow? Well, the cat did scratch me just now!”

“Then it must still be somewhere,” Bridou said, looking Pete calmly in the eye.

“What’s so important about the collar?” asked Jupiter.

“Maybe nothing,” Bridou said, raising the rifle. “But we’ll search for it. I hope you have more luck with that than with finding your friend! Or have you found him by now?”

17. The Underworld

“What do you know about Bob?” asked Jupiter.

Carter Bridou stroked the rifle. “Cassius told me that you were looking for him and that’s why you were at his house yesterday, Pete. He talked a lot... including telling me that a car was stolen outside their driveway last night... but has since been recovered... Anyway, I want the collar now...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jupiter knelt down on the floor. “Pete, help me, please. The collar has to be somewhere. You look on the window side, I’ll look in the back of the room.”

Pete looked at Jupiter. His friend was up to something—that was clear to the Second Investigator. Obviously Jupiter wanted to divert Bridou’s attention from himself.

One word flashed through Pete’s mind—a word that Jupiter had said just now—Cerberus... Cerberus, the hound who guarded the entrance of the underworld. One was outside the mansion, but inside there was also another three-headed dog. It was on the pedestal against the wall, but what was he guarding? Pete tried hard not to look.

“I have to distract Bridou,” he thought to himself, so he did as Jupiter had suggested. He knelt down too and slid towards the window. “It must be here somewhere!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jupe crawling slowly towards the pedestal where the three-headed dog was sitting. Then something came to Pete—use Mary’s method! It might be able to help now.

“There it is,” he launched out. “No, not at all, little mistake, it was only a thread. Why is the collar so important to you, Mr Bridou? You didn’t answer our question earlier. It’s only a cat’s collar. It can get lost. Then you just get another one, Mr Bridou. By the way, it’s unusual for cats to wear collars. My aunt is a vet and she always says—”

“Say, did something blow into your brain?” cried Bridou. “Stop talking right now and find that thing!”

“It’s all right,” Pete said, but teased it out a little more, especially as Jupiter had now arrived directly under the hound from hell. “And that thing you said about the stolen car, that’s interesting. I read a report that more and more cars are being stolen—especially lately. So that’s increasing, you know? And you say the car was recovered right away? Very unusual, I think...”

Bridou turned around. “Jupiter, what are you doing? Come out from there!”

While Bridou was focussed on the First Investigator, Pete quickly took out the collar from his pocket and put out the button.

“I’ve got it!” shouted Pete, waving the collar in front of him with one hand. With the other hand he put Bob’s button into his pocket. “Here, Mr Bridou, I found it!”

“Give it to me!” the man instructed.

Pete handed the collar to the man.

At that moment, they heard a scraping sound. The wooden panelling behind the three-headed dog had started to move. A few moments later, a large, dark opening had opened up.

Almost a little proudly, Jupiter straightened up. “A secret mechanism,” he said. “The entrance to the underworld, so to speak, isn’t it, Mr Bridou?”

Carter Bridou was up immediately. Alternately he pointed the rifle at Jupiter and then at Pete. “You feel great now, Jupiter, don’t you?”

“I think we’ve found the entrance to Bob’s prison! A prisoner in Mr Pinches’s underworld, and I’m pretty sure he’s not the only one stuck down there. I just don’t know exactly why yet.”

Bridou now kept the rifle pointed at Jupiter all the time, but without taking his eyes off Pete. “What do you suspect, Mr Smarty Pants?”

“Well, I think the whole matter has to do with Allister Pinches’s testimony... and with the release of Pedro Sanchez yesterday.”

“Do you think I’m Sanchez?”

Jupiter grinned. “That thought did come to us, but now, I don’t think so, sir.”

“Be that as it may. Your discovery of the secret passage was nothing but a Pyrrhic victory. You do realize that, don’t you?”

“That remains to be seen,” Jupiter said confidently.

“Please... what kind of victory?” Pete asked between them.

“A Pyrrhic victory.” Bridou smiled at him. “A Pyrrhic victory is a success that comes with great losses or unacceptable costs. For unlike King Pyrrhus over 2000 years ago, you are leaving immediately with a defeat. Get in there!” he commanded, pointing to the dark opening. “Now I have no choice. You asked for it! But first, give me your mobile phones!”

Yes, Jupiter and Pete had no choice. They reluctantly handed Bridou their mobile phones, and then were directed to the secret door. Hopefully, there was one good thing about the situation—they would soon see Bob again!

Jupiter was the first to venture into the dark opening, followed by Pete and finally Bridou, who operated a mechanism that closed the secret door. At the same time, a light glowed, dimly illuminating the passageway. They walked along it and then descended a staircase.

“Open the door there!” Bridou ordered when they reached the bottom.

Jupiter obeyed. Through the metal door they entered a rock-walled chamber, lit on the sides by fire torches—artificial fire torches, as Jupiter quickly noticed. In the wall opposite were three metal gates above which Jupiter could decipher the words ‘Tartarus’, ‘Asphodel Meadows’ and ‘Elysium’ written in fiery letters.

“Some would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven,” Jupiter muttered.

Bridou had heard it and said: “I would have put it differently, but indeed, this kind of thing is not everyone’s hobby! We are in an old mountain tunnel that Allister found and converted to his liking. He thought it was a nice idea.”

“Now I also understand why there was the argument with Mrs Baker,” Jupiter said. “Probably this underground labyrinth reaches under her property. The construction of a new pool would cause certain problems...”

With the rifle, Bridou told Pete and Jupiter to stop next to the gate under the sign ‘Tartarus’. He pulled out a key, opened it and nodded invitingly. Jupiter and Pete entered.

They entered a smaller rock-walled chamber. The air was hot and stuffy. Two more artificial torches just barely illuminated an oversized mural depicting existence in hell, with flames beating around tortured human bodies.

Bob was standing in front of the mural. “Finally,” he said.

“Unfortunately, we come as prisoners,” Jupiter replied, “and not as liberators... but we’ll think of something.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to think about it,” said Carter Bridou. He had also entered, probably to check on things, but was already making moves to leave the room.

“Just a moment, please,” Jupiter said. “Surely we can find the leisure to clarify our situation a little? Since we are trapped for the foreseeable future anyway, it will hardly do you any harm, will it?”

Bridou shook her head. “You can figure out things by yourself.”

Jupiter was not satisfied with that. “Isn’t it somehow also a good feeling when someone finally recognizes you after you’ve had to work in secret all your life, Mr Bridou?” he said slowly.

Bridou looked sharply at Jupiter. Then he said: “Be careful! A need for recognition can be a great hindrance, Jupiter. You seem to have a lot of them.”

Now it was up to Jupiter to remain silent. Finally, he turned to Bob and asked: “How did you know this gentleman is Carter Bridou? Did he introduce himself to you?”

But before Bob could answer, they heard an unknown voice saying: “No. That’s what I told him!”

18. Release from the Underworld

Jupiter and Pete spun around. The voice had come from a dark corner where the dim light barely penetrated. In their joy of seeing each other again, Jupiter and Pete had missed the fact that another person was also there.

An elderly man had stood up and stepped into the light. He was wearing a checked flannel shirt and old-fashioned cut jeans. His back was slightly bent. "I'm sorry you got into this," he said.

"Meet..." Bob said, "Mr Allister Pinches."

"Mr Pinches..." Jupiter said. "Glad to finally meet you. I had already expected to find you down here. Did you know we were reading the same book?"

"What? You are interested in *Hell in the Middle Ages*?"

"No... it's the book about the functions of human memory... or rather, about its malfunctions. I suppose you looked into it because you had doubts about your testimony at the time."

"Well, you all might as well get acquainted with each other," Bridou said and pointed to the wall where there was a small shelf. "I guess I'll have to go get some more water bottles, sandwiches and chocolate bars. I didn't expect four prisoners."

With that, Bridou went out and locked the door.

"So he intends to keep us here for a long while," Pete remarked.

"Before he comes back, there are many things that I would like to clear up with you, Mr Pinches," Jupe said. "What actually happened at the museum?"

"Oh, boy." Pinches groaned. "I was at the exhibition to photograph objects where photography was actually forbidden. Details, details... I'm a bit of a fanatic, I know that. In order to take my photos in peace, I hid and let myself be locked in the museum in the evening. Suddenly I felt that I was not alone. There was someone else—a security guard. I didn't realize that they had a night security guard. I wanted to hide again, but it was too late.

"The guy was at least as surprised as I was. He had something under his arm, but I hardly noticed it. I stared at his cap, not noticing at first that it was a fake. He said the museum was closed. I held my camera behind my back, muttered an apology and expected trouble. However, the man just said: 'Stay here!' and then he was gone..."

Mr Pinches paused for a moment before continuing: "I waited for a while, but nothing happened. Then the alarm sounded, and very soon, the police came and picked me up. They found that something had been stolen. It took a long time to convince them that I had nothing to do with the theft."

"I can imagine that," Jupiter said, "but you succeeded. From then on, the police investigation focused on you as a witness because you had seen the thief. The statement you finally made from your memory then led to Pedro Sanchez being sent to prison. In your desk, there is a folder with documents relating to the trial. Unfortunately, I was only able to have a brief look at it, especially notes of the interviews you have provided the police."

"The police were under pressure to succeed at the time," Mr Pinches continued. "After Sanchez was proven to have been seen near the crime scene, the police were convinced that he was the perpetrator. I had a bad feeling, but it diminished from interview to interview. I

was shown many photos of people again and again. Finally, I recognized Sanchez... or I thought I recognized him.”

The First Investigator nodded. “You were subject to a misinformation effect. I read about this, in particular from the research of the psychologist Elizabeth Loftus. As I understand it, if a witness is shown a certain person over and over again in several interviews, at some point, he thinks he recognizes him. A new piece of information overlays the memory... and the wrong person is accused!”

“And you push doubt away because you don’t want to come across as fickle,” Pinches said. “The policeman who questioned me swore me in before the trial. He told me not to embarrass him, and especially not myself. He said I was not an unreliable person. I should stand by my statement and not buckle.”

“But years later, when you came across the book about memory impairment, the thought crossed your mind that you might have made such a mistake... and that perhaps the wrong person was now in prison. Mr Pinches, when you heard about Mr Sanchez’s release, did you decide to go and see him?”

“Yes,” Allister said. “I wanted to talk to him about everything, find out if I was wrong then, and if so, apologize and see if there was anything I could do to make it up to him... and also—”

At that moment, they heard the door unlock and Carter Bridou came back in with a bag containing several bottles of water and packs of food. He put the bag on the ground while pointing his rifle at his prisoners.

“So you’ve had a nice conversation?” Carter said. “You can continue on after I leave!”

“Just a moment, Mr Bridou,” Pete said. “How did you actually know Mr Pinches?”

“At an auction of art objects... by pure chance,” Bridou said. “The interest group is small, and I remembered seeing him before. Then I started selling him objects. That’s how we became friends. Isn’t that how it was, Allister?”

“Yes, unfortunately!” Mr Pinches said. “If I had known back then—”

“Allister!” said Bridou. “We had lots of shared interests and interesting conversations. I honestly regret that this has now come to an end.”

“Unfortunately, it was all based on a lie,” Pinches countered, “and now we part ways!”

“Yes, I will leave tomorrow. I have a few financial issues to sort out that I can’t do over the weekend.”

“Where are you going, Mr Bridou?” Pete asked. “Out of the country?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out!” Bridou snapped.

“So that’s why we’re all sitting here,” Bob said, “because you still need time to escape. How will we get free when you have made your escape?”

“I’ll send a message to the police. Then they will free you.”

“How are you going to leave the country, Mr Bridou?” Pete continued probing.

“That’s none of your business.”

“—I guess you’ll be going in your yacht,” Jupiter said. “Then it will probably be a few days before we see daylight again.”

“If you don’t shut your mouth, I can leave you here a lot longer!” Bridou barked.

“Before you leave Mr Bridou,” said Jupiter unperturbed, “is it true that at first you simply wanted to stop Mr Pinches from travelling to San Francisco? Somehow, you caught him at the last moment, when he was already in the car. You then threatened him with the rifle. Mr Pinches tried to make a run for it down the forest road. How did you stop him? Did you shoot the tyres?”

Before Bridou could reply, Pinches interjected: "That's how it was. That rifle there belongs to Carter too. Then he took me out of the car and led me back across the woods to this dungeon."

"Later I showed up to feed the cats," Bob took over, "which was when I discovered the secret passage. At that moment, however, Bridou came and locked me in here."

Jupiter took the floor again. "Keeping Bob's disappearance a secret was hard enough as the police would have quickly swarmed the area, possibly found him and your escape would have been foiled. So you came up with the idea of having all the tracks lead away from here. You stole the white Toyota and wanted to make us believe with the dictated letter that Bob was involved in a completely different story. Bob's jacket served the same purpose. Everything was to distract us from this place. I have to say that that was not badly staged. However, Bob was smarter. He left us coded clues that the story wasn't true."

"—Which is of no use to you now," Bridou remarked. "As I said, you only had a Pyrrhic victory. Soon I'll be gone."

"The police will soon know that we are missing as well!" Pete burst out.

"I'll think of something for that. I can change my escape plan. Tomorrow is Monday and I'll be gone, so I just need to hold you here till I'm free." He turned to go.

"There's one more thing, Mr Bridou," Pete continued to delay Bridou's departure. "If I remember correctly, we don't even know why you wanted to prevent Mr Pinches from going to San Francisco."

Bridou yawned. "You know that eventually."

Pinches cleared his throat. "Then I'll say it now—because you are the thief from the museum!" he said. "You were the fake security guard but I didn't recognize you when I met you again years later."

"Bingo, Allister!" Bridou exclaimed. "I was a little taken aback by that even though I always change my face during my little thieving sprees. In any case, I was happy about it, and I must admit, it was exciting in a way, a thrill, at least at first. How often I wanted to tell you the truth, but of course I couldn't. We still had a good friendship."

"—Which was based on a lie," Pinches repeated angrily. "How did you actually escape from the museum back then? There were police officers everywhere very quickly. I've been asking myself that ever since I sat in here!"

That was the cue for Jupiter. "I have a theory about that," he said.

"Anything else would really have surprised me," Bridou murmured.

"You opened the back window of the museum and triggered the alarm. From there, you abseiled into your yacht," Jupiter said. "Not only are you a master of distraction, but also of sailing knots! My money's on a slipped clove hitch. On your yacht, you just had to tug on the free working end, and the rope would detach so that there was no evidence."

"Of course," Bridou said, visibly annoyed, "but now that everything is settled, I will say goodbye."

"Just a moment, please!" said Pete.

"What now?"

"The... calls from Mr Pinches on your mobile."

"I called myself," Bridou said, "at least this morning and yesterday afternoon—from Allister's phone and from his mobile, which I had taken from him." Again he turned to the side and wanted to leave.

Instinctively, Jupe sensed that Pete was playing for time. He didn't know why, but Pete must have a good reason.

“Mr Pinches,” Jupe therefore said quickly, “since when did you suspect that Bridou was the thief from the art museum?”

At that moment, Bridou turned around with interest and looked at Pinches.

“Only recently,” Mr Pinches said. “I told Carter about my suspicion that my memory might have deceived me, and that’s when he reacted so strangely. I didn’t give it another thought at first, until I happened to find a photograph in Carter’s apartment. It was the Danaid statue that had been stolen at the time. Actually, I was just looking for a lighter in a drawer, and there was the photo. In the background was a building—an apartment building that had been erected only two years ago. That’s when I became suspicious.

“I began to read up on other art thefts and found that Carter had often been in the vicinity at the time of each crime. Was he the thief? I didn’t want to believe it! Then, when I heard about Sanchez’s early release, I decided to go to him with a photo of Carter and ask him if he had seen Carter around the museum at the time. Of course, I couldn’t tell Carter about my trip. So I asked Lesley to look after the cats so he wouldn’t suspect anything.”

“But you got wind of the trip, Mr Bridou,” Jupiter said.

“I have my sources of information. The news of Sanchez’s release reached us at about the same time. I already suspected that Allister was on to the truth. He was more reserved than before, so I came to see him to find out how much he knew by now.”

Now Bob took the floor: “You came at the last moment. Mr Pinches was already in the car and everything was threatening to blow up. You had to act. You’ve probably amassed quite a bit of wealth through your thefts and set yourself up in such a way that you can escape if necessary.”

“Yes, but unfortunately I need my bank to be opened for that... Anyway, I have had enough talking to you lot, so I’ll say goodbye for good.” With the rifle at the ready, Bridou walked backwards out of the room.

Stunned, the prisoners heard Bridou close and lock the door from the outside.

“There’s nothing we can do now,” Bob said. “I wonder where he’ll go to?”

“South America, I think,” Jupiter said.

“We’ll never see him again!” added Allister Pinches.

Pete glanced at his watch. “We still have one more chance!” he said. The others looked at him in amazement.

At the same moment, they heard footsteps approaching. Then the door was unlocked. While Jupiter, Bob and also Mr Pinches backed away uncertainly, Pete stepped forward expectantly.

Someone pushed the door open.

“Inspector Cotta!” cried Pete. “You are just in time!”

Behind Cotta stood two policemen who had Carter Bridou between them. He threw angry glances at The Three Investigators.

Cotta grinned all over his face and pointed at the art dealer. “Through the house window, we watched this guy climb out of the secret passage. When we asked him to put down his rifle, he tried to flee, but didn’t get far. Now I’m mighty curious to know what this story is all about.”

Relieved, but also surprised, Jupiter stared at the inspector. “It will really amaze you, Inspector Cotta. Anyway, where did you come from so suddenly?”

“Pete texted me that you’re coming here, and that if you haven’t called by a certain time, I should check up on you urgently.”

“So that’s why you took your mobile phone to the toilet earlier,” Jupiter remembered.

“I’m sorry,” Pete said. “I didn’t mean to do things behind your back, but the risk was just —”

“Well done, Pete, well done,” Jupiter said with a smile. “That was really good work!”

To celebrate, Jupiter had invited Mary to Headquarters. The Three Investigators told Bob’s cousin what had happened at Allister Pinches’s underworld mansion, and Jupiter wanted to know what Mary had done in the meantime.

“I did some research on Carter Bridou,” Mary said, “but I didn’t get much—just that he’s an art dealer. Apparently he always kept a low profile.”

“Bridou’s method of success is to never attract anyone’s attention,” Jupe concluded.

“Unfortunately, it was a futile search then,” Mary said.

Jupiter grinned. “It’s called Danaid work!” he said.

“Danaid what?” Mary asked.

“Danaid work. As a punishment for their crime, the Danaids were condemned in Hades to the endless task of filling water into a vessel that leaked,” Jupe explained. “Therefore, the expression ‘Danaid work’ means pointless and endless work, which was what you just did. Ha! Ha!”

“Well, thank you very much,” Mary said. “Since Bob is back, our deal begins from now on, Jupiter.” She pondered. “Shall we go to the cinema together? Just think, at a movie, I have to be silent for ninety minutes. That’s the chance!”

“What’s the movie?” asked Jupiter.

“*Water Party*,” said Mary. “It’s not entirely a logical movie but has various emotional scenes.”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter said, giving Bob and Pete an uncertain look. “Are you guys up for it?”

Mary gave a short laugh. “I was actually just thinking about you and me only!”

“Well...” said Pete, “I can’t anyway. Kelly’s coming back, you know, from that yoga thing, and we’d like to...”

“Things aren’t looking any better for me either,” Bob added. “Lesley has fallen out with her friend and is taking the evening ferry to Long Beach. She asked if I could pick her up and maybe we’ll go for a drink and I’ll tell her about the cats.” Bob stifled a grin and looked at Jupiter.

The First Investigator cleared his throat. His hand went to his lower lip but missed it by a few centimetres. “Well... uh...” he mumbled. “Yes... Yes, okay... so we’re all off tonight then. The three of us will meet here again tomorrow morning.”

“And get ready for this...” Pete said and added with a grin: “I will definitely carry out the JJMT! The ‘Jupiter Jones Memory Test’ on the hair colour of the leading actress, the hair colour of the cinema cashier, the hair colour...”